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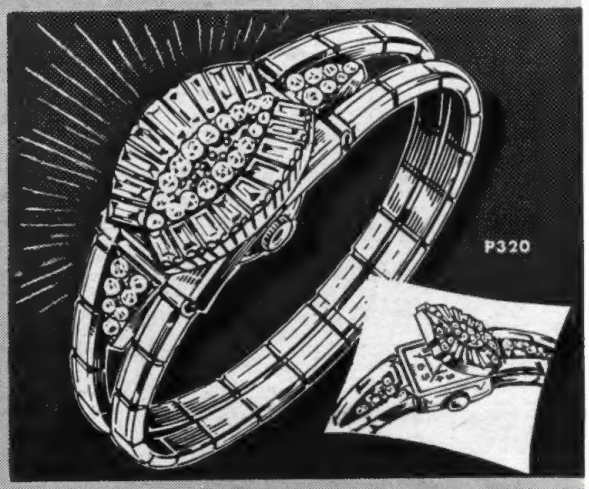

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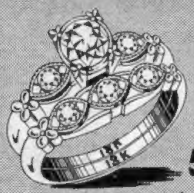

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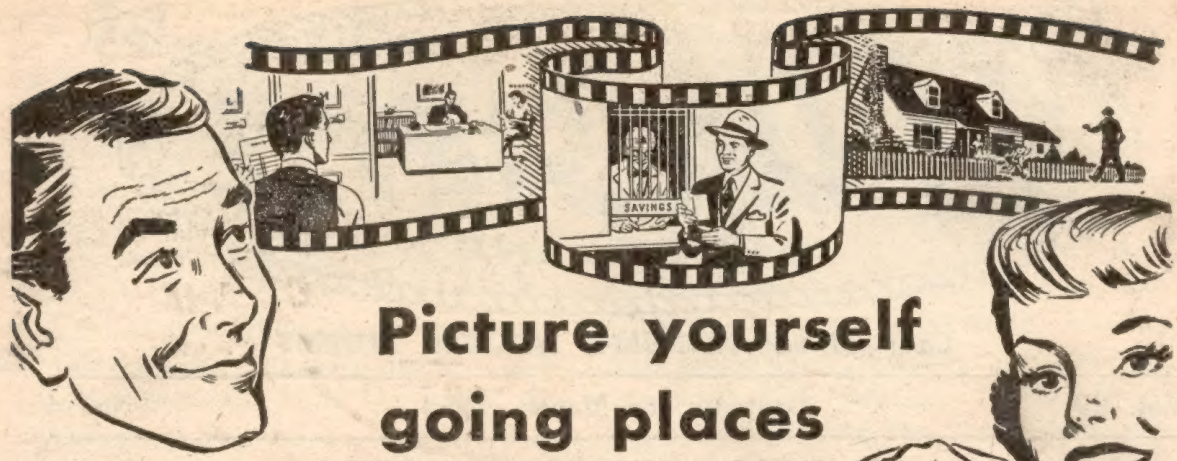

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.44 Western MAGAZINE

Combined with ACE-HIGH WESTERN STORIES

Vol. 29 Contents for March, 1953 No. 4

• • COMPLETE WESTERN NOVELETTES • •

GUNS WAIT IN SPANISH SPUR ..... **Kenneth L. Sinclair** **10**
Mark Lanton rode four hundred miles to a girl he didn't trust, a spread he didn't own, and a range war he hated to fight!

STAGE TO BUCKHORN ..... **Rod Patterson** **46**
Even the best buckskin-popper on the Buckhorn run couldn't earn the dinero that Barney was toting for ballast!

HUNTED LAWMAN ..... **T. T. Flynn** **78**
It was open season on Larry Remington . . . hunted and damned as a shoot-in-the-back killer!

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• • WESTERN SHORT STORIES • •

PAY-OFF IN CEDARVILLE ..... **Richard Ferber** **30**
No cowman hated the settlers as much as Matt Lattimore. Yet Matt was ready to toss in his life to back their desperate play!

HUNGRY—BUT HEROIC ..... **A. C. Abbott** **38**
When a pair of drifters like Pecos and Curly get hungry enough, they might even turn out an honest day's work—and wake up as heroes!

IN LINE OF DUTY ..... **Bill Harral** **59**
When your girl's brother is a killer . . . your lawman's badge seems cold as your heart, and you gun too heavy to pull!

THE LONG SHOT ..... **A. A. Baker** **69**
Judge Yontz figured to get the Comanches after the whisky caravan, the outlaws after the stage—and the cavalry after all of them!

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NEXT ISSUE OUT FEBRUARY 20th

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"Four months after enrolling for NRI course, was able to service Radios . . . averaged $10 to $15 a week spare time. Now have full time Radio and Television business."—William Weyde, Brooklyn, New York.

SWITCHED TO TV SERVICING
"I recenty switched over from studio work and am now holding a position as service technician. I am still with RCA, enjoying my work more and more every day."—N. Ward, Ridgefield, N. J.

WANT YOUR OWN BUSINESS?

Let me show you how you can be your own boss. Many NRI trained men start their own business with capital earned in spare time. Robert Dohmen, New Prague, Minn., whose store is shown at left, says, "Am now tied in with two Television outfits and do warranty work for dealers. Often fall back to NRI textbooks for information."

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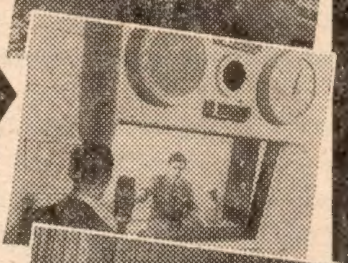

3. BRIGHT FUTURE

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.44 TALK

EVERYONE, of course, knows about General Custer and his tragic Last Stand. He was a controversial figure, and the battle of the Little Big Horn —the grim finale to the Indian Wars—has been written about from many angles. But so much has been written about the General's strategy and so little about his private life that we think this story sent to us by Bess Ritter is especially interesting. . . .

One of the toughest soldiers who ever fought the Indians in the good old days when the West was still wild, spent all his free time writing love letters to his wife. This was the so-famous General George A. Custer, whose affection never waned through the twelve years of his marriage to Libbie Bacon.

Although travelling light was obviously important to every soldier in the field, he always lugged along a small writing desk. It was one of his most important pieces of equipment, because he needed it in order to write letters to Libby. He did so almost every night, by the light of a candle, even though the illumination might reveal the camp's position. And what letters they were! They always consisted of full, cramped pages—running to twenty, thirty, or even forty pages long.

General George A. Custer was the rough-and-ready type when it came to vocabulary. He knew all the so-called "bad" words in the westerner's book—plus some of his own. But when he wrote to his Libby he specialized in tender terms—including phrases like "Dear Dirl," "My Rosebud," "My Sunbeam," and "Lovely Libby." And when he got serious, he'd add sentences like, "Neither tongue nor pen can express the intensity of my love."

He even went so far as to get himself arrested, tried, found guilty, and sentenced to a year's suspension minus the benefit of pay, simply because he couldn't stand being separated from Libby for six short weeks. He was at Fort Wallace at the time, and she, at Fort Riley, which was one hundred and fifty miles away. First, he was tempted to desert. Then he trumped up some excuse to take his men to Riley. But what got him into trouble was his impatience to arrive. He drove them so hard that twenty out of seventy-five deserted. And he was in such a hurry that he had the culprits shot, simply because more lenient action would necessitate delay. But all he said, later on, after the punishment was meted out, was "I am in disgrace, I know, but I managed to see Libby."

* * *

See what we mean about an interesting sidelight to the tough, fighting general's personality? And for more action-stories and features on the old West, don't miss the big May issue. It'll be on your newsstands February 20th! —*The Editor.*

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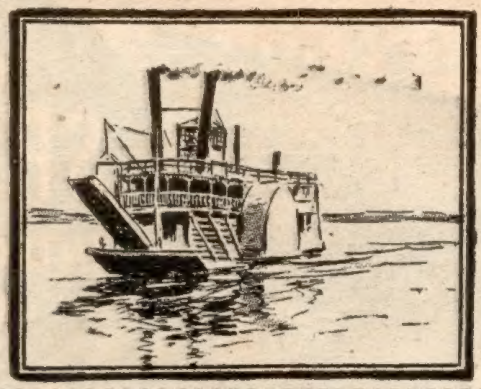
RIGHT CARGO

By John T. Lynch



The people in the frontier settlement of Fort Benton, at the head of navigation on the Missouri River in the '60's, relied on the river boats to bring the major necessities of life to the outpost. As the steamboats could not make the trip up from St. Louis during the winter the Bentonites placed heavy orders for supplies—enough to last all winter—in the early fall. The last few boats carried enormous cargoes, because no more shipments would come until spring.

In the winter of 1861, the Bentonites either used more tobacco, and consumed more whiskey, than usual, or they had not ordered enough. These vital items were completely gone at least one month before the spring river boat was due. The horrible sufferings of the male population was, of course, pitiful to behold.

Mere tobacco shavings actually took the place of gold on the gambling tables. Saloon and storekeepers tore up the plank flooring of their establishments, and panned the debris and dust gathered from underneath in order to separate the tobacco tailings that had fallen between the cracks in the floor.

About the whiskey shortage, not much could be done. Stoic, spartan courage, under great hardship, became the laudable attitude. Many Bentonites were faced with a choice of either thirsting to death or drinking water. To them, one fate was as bad as the other; but they chose to drink the water and remain partly alive until the spring boat brought whiskey.

The winter of '61 was worse than usual. Not until mid-April did word reach Fort Benton that two river boats, making the trip together, would soon arrive. By this time, the settlement was in need of many things. Flour, medicines, salt, and general trade goods were gone, as well as tobacco and whiskey.

The entire population was down on the river bank early on the morning the steamboats were to come in. A great cheer went up as the first boat arrived around a distant bend in the river. The folks were ready with another cheer when the second boat would appear—but it did not become visible. The throng became increasingly anxious. As the first boat pulled within shouting distance, a Bentonite called, "Where's the other boat?"

"It ain't coming!" came the answer from a deckhand. "She hit a sandbank and blew up. We saved th' crew. They're aboard us. But th' boat an' cargo ain't no more. We carried part—an' the other boat had the rest. We split th' cargo two ways. One boat carried nothing but tobacco and whiskey. The other carried trade goods, medicine, and stuff."

The collective breaths of the Bentonites could be heard gasping. They were afraid to hear the answer to the next question,

(Continued on page 109)

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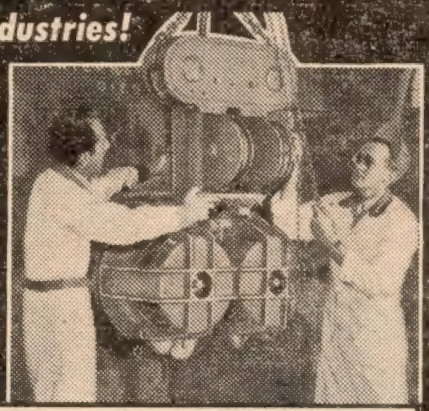

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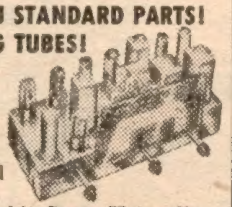

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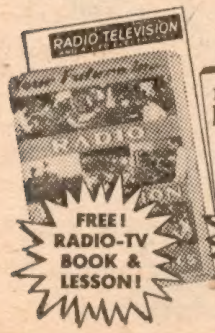

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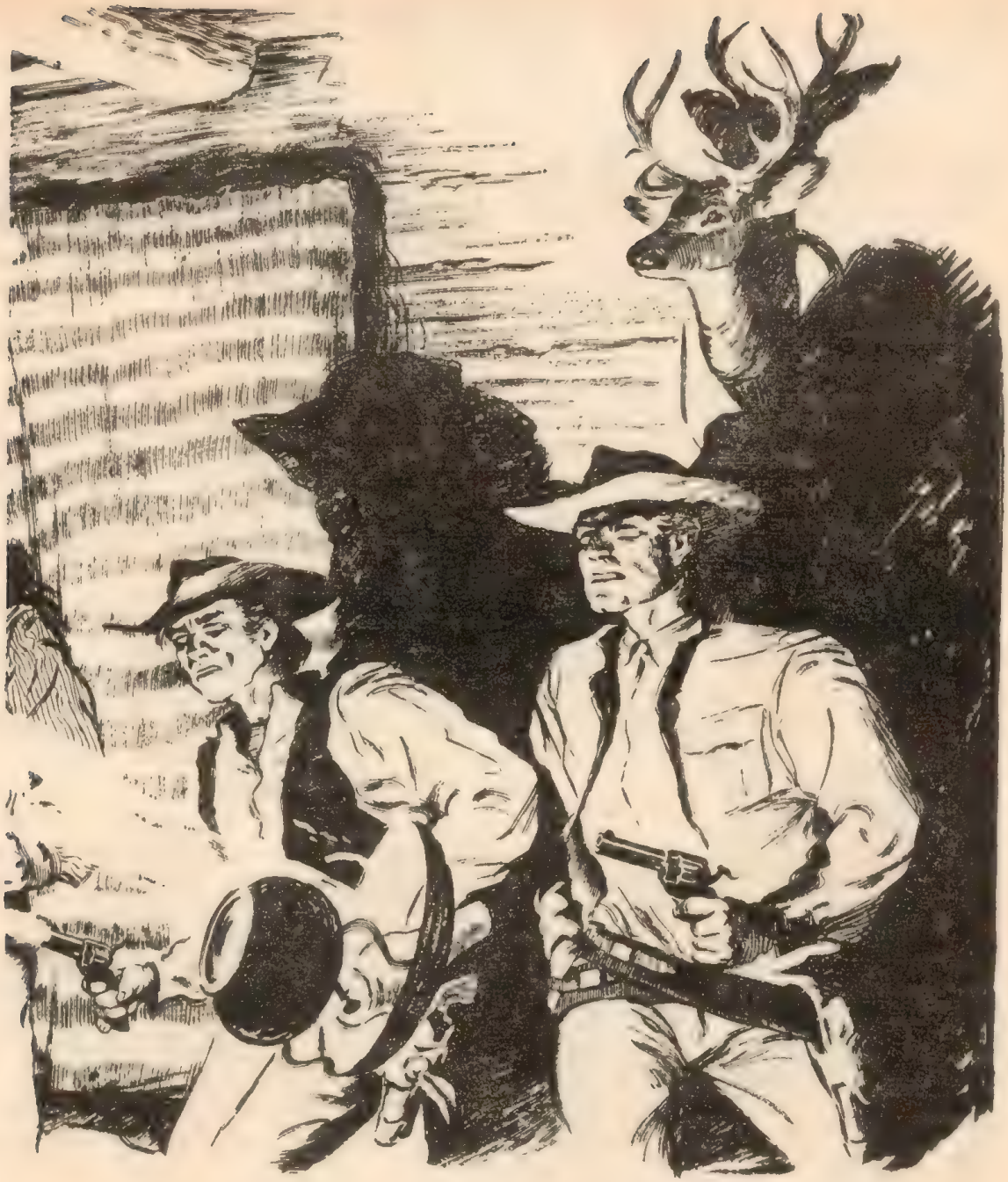
GUNS WAIT IN SPANISH SPUR

• By Kenneth L. Sinclair



Sny's gun barked, and his body crumpled under the bullet's impact . . .

Mark Lanton rode four hundred weary miles to Spanish Spur—to return to a girl he didn't trust, a spread that he didn't own, and a range war that he hated to fight!

IT GAVE Mark Lanton a wry, back-to-yesterday feeling to find old Dake Rawl sleeping in the lighted doorway of the livery stable in Spanish Spur. Rawl had been sitting in exactly the same position, his chair tilted back and his balding head sagged down so that his chin touched his chest, on the day when Mark had put

this town behind him. As Mark stepped from his saddle now he had the notion that three years of his life, and all the new country and mesas and mountains he had crossed, had been only something imagined. A dreamed-up escape from the situation he had faced here.

But the dead man whose body hung across the saddle of the livery nag Mark led was no dream. Mark put the toe of his boot to a rung of Rawl's chair, bringing its front legs down to the worn planks with a thump. The old liveryman started and came awake, blinking up at the rangy, smiling, black-haired man who had interrupted his nap.

"Mark Lanton," Rawl said. "Wild Mark Lanton! Damn, I never expected I'd see . . ." He stared at the other horse, with the big star brand of the livery burned into the skirt of its saddle and the dead man slung across it. He grabbed the cane that leaned against the wall and came to his feet. "What's this, now?"

"I'm returning your horse," Mark said dryly. "The hombre on it was waiting for me up in the pass. Well hid, but the horse nickered at mine in time to warn me something was up, and he missed his shot. Who is he?"

"Gave the name of Scott when he rented that saddler. Been in town a couple weeks, livin' at the hotel, talkin' to nobody." Rawl squinted up at Mark's lean face. "Tried to gulch you, hey? Somebody must of put 'im to the chore. Anybody know you was comin' back?"

"Not for certain," Mark said guardedly. He was thinking of the letter, on perfumed paper with a dozen forwarding addresses scrawled on its envelope, that had caught up with him over in Utah. He hadn't answered it, though. He had merely dropped the job he'd had at the time and had started out.

The liveryman chuckled dryly. "You get in any fights while you was away, make any enemies that might wait here to put lead in you?" He passed a hand over his jaw and answered his own question. "No, I reckon not. You're the only hombre I ever seen that could punch a man, in a fight over a girl or somethin', an' still be his friend afterwards."

Old Dake was right about that. Mark hadn't an enemy in the world, except here in Spanish Spur. And that enmity was not of his making; it was rooted in the fact that he wasn't really a Lanton at all, but merely the adopted son of old John Lanton. The son that old John, king of the Saddle Valley and a law unto himself, always had favored over his own flesh and blood. Someday the Lanton ranch would be a heritage, left to the one old John's whim chose, and in that lay the cause of the hate.

And now the old bitterness, the feeling of being an outsider here and being hated for his unearned luck of having John Lanton like him returned to Mark. He said, "I'll be hunting up the sheriff."

Dake Rawl shook his head. "He had to go down to Durango. You just leave that hombre in the barn here for now. You can see the sheriff when he comes back."

Mark nodded, glancing around to the lighted windows of the trim little cottage across the street. "Take care of my horse, will you? Grain him. He's had a long pull of it." He started across the street.

"Hey!" the oldster called sharply. "Hold on a minute. They's things I ought to tell you about."

"Later, Dake. An hombre mustn't keep a lady waiting."

AS HE stepped to the porch of the house, he saw Lil Vorhees inside, her silk-sheathed body moving lithely as she crossed the lighted parlor. A hundred times in the past three years he'd tried to remember her face, to bring the image of her back into his mind. But she was more beautiful than he could possibly have remembered. Her gleaming blonde hair was piled on the top

of her head. She held herself proudly, not in the least unaware that her body had attained the full, powerfully appealing bloom of womanhood.

He lifted his hand to knock, but then smiled a little and shoved the door open, intending to surprise her.

Then he stopped short. Lil was in the hallway now, and she was in the arms of a stocky, powerfully built man. She was smiling, laughing lightly as the man kissed her.

Both of them discovered Mark's presence at the same time. Lil's eyes widened, without embarrassment. The man's plump but handsome face darkened and he dropped a hand to the stock of his gun, saying, "Didn't you ever learn to knock, mister?"

Lil disengaged herself and said, "Hello, Mark. Ed, this is Mark Lanton. Don't mind his barging in like this. He's always trying to spring a little joke of some sort. Mark, meet Ed Cowley, the new foreman of the Long L."

Mark frowned, wondering what had happened to old Ben Wale, who had been foreman of the Lanton outfit as long as Mark could remember.

"One of the Lantons, eh?" Cowley said without offering his hand. "I guess that makes it all right. The Lantons do as they damn please. Well, I was just leaving." He picked up his hat from the hall stand and strode past Mark and left the house.

"I'm sorry, Lil," Mark said tightly, "if I interrupted something."

Her eyes regarded him with knowing amusement. "You're not sorry. You're mad."

"All right, I'm mad. I rode four hundred miles because you said in that letter that you were lonely. I should have known better."

She gave him a tiny smile, lifting a hand to her hair. "It's not worth arguing about, Mark. Treat life lightly and don't let anything or anybody get under your hide—that was always your way, wasn't it? Now don't be just an ordinary man, getting mad because a woman lives by the same code he does. Come sit down and tell me where you've been all this time."

"Places," Mark said, following her into the parlor and taking a chair. "A lot of them, all different but all alike underneath. What happened to Ben Wale?"

It had been Ben who had lifted Mark, a kid scared clear through but determined to be game, to the back of his first horse. And had picked the kid up when he got thrown, with John Lanton's laughter booming across the dusty corral, and had whispered, "Damn it, sprout, don't quit now! The Ol' Man hates a quitter. . . ."

Mark had made a ride of it, after three tries. And later he'd been taught how to use a rope and a gun, how to tell a good horse from a poor one, how to gentle a bronc. He learned cow savvy. But not from John Lanton, whose ruthless code it was that a kid learned things the hard way, by himself. Old Ben had been Mark's teacher.

And now Lil Vorhees was saying, "Your brother Gid thought the job needed a younger man, one with more push. So he hired Ed."

Mark looked at her unsmilingly. "I don't get this, Lil. It's not like you to waste your time on a seventy-a-month ranch foreman."

She came over and perched on the arm of his chair, her hand resting lightly on his shoulder, her eyes laughing down at him. "You're saying that I'm a climber, that I look at a man and think what he can get for me in the world. Like I did with you. Well, you can't hurt me with that. I don't let things bother me anymore, and that's a trick I learned from you. I'm a saloonkeeper's daughter, and the women of this town have always looked down their noses at me, but someday I'll put them in their place. Only I'm the saloonkeeper now. Dad died two years ago, and now I buy the whisky and I hire the girls. It really puts

me on the wrong side of the fence, doesn't it?"

She rose and walked away, her body moving with a feline restlessness under her gown. Mark said, "You're being mighty frank, Lil."

She turned and faced him. "Why not? We know each other very well, don't we? I made a play for you because I figured you'd inherit the Long L one day, and Gid got mad and threatened to kill you because he had wanted me himself. You didn't stay around to fight it out. You didn't think anything was worth that kind of trouble. The Long L wasn't worth it, I wasn't worth it, so you went over the hill."

"Then why send for me now?"

She put her hands on her hips and looked at him for a long time. "You won't believe it, but I had to know if I'd gotten you out of my blood. That's all there was to it, Mark. You see, I'd been wrong all along in thinking you'd inherit Saddle Valley. He didn't leave it to you, Mark."

His head lifted. "Lil, are you saying that—"

"Yes." Her eyes were bright now and she seemed to be getting some vindictive pleasure from telling him this. "John Lanton is dead."

THIS was the reason why she had been so frank. The game was done, and now there was no point in concealing the bet she had made and lost.

But Mark hardly thought of that. He was trying to fit the fact of old John's death into his mind. It seemed impossible. He remembered a towering man with a shock of white hair and a wide and mobile mouth, a fierce old man who had driven first the Ute Indians and then the mavericking settlers from his valley. A man whose word was law because he made it so. A man who maintained that in force lay the only kindness in this world, that by coddling a man you only ruined him. It was hard to believe that that iron will was stilled at last, that old John was dead.

"Lil, how did it happen?"

She made a tiny shrug. "He started out for town one Saturday night and never got here. They back-tracked his horse when it came home, and found where he'd fallen from the saddle and never got up again. The doctor said it was his heart. Didn't they send word to you?"

Mark shook his head.

"Gid wouldn't," Lil Vorhees said. "He's a good hater. His father always bragged you up, told Gid that you were ten times the man he'd ever be, even after Gid ran you out. And Gid hates me, too. He's hated me ever since I turned him down for you. That hurt his Lanton pride."

"When did the Old Man die?"

"Eight months ago. It's all a twisted joke, isn't it?"

"I don't see anything funny about it."

"You will, Mark. I banked on you, thinking you'd get the L, but you didn't want to fight for anything. Drifting's an easy way out, isn't it? Now Gid's got Saddle Valley, if he can hold it. But you weren't cut off with a dollar. You got something too. You got Maverick Canyon, darling."

He stared at her smiling mouth, thinking that he never had been really in love with Lil Vorhees at all. She'd been pretty and willing, and that had been enough. Now she was beautiful and, looking at her now, he wondered that he had ever had the strength to leave her.

He said, "Maverick's full of nesters, and no good to anyone."

Old John Lanton had made it so. When the nesters moved in on Saddle Valley, as they always would when they saw good land, he had run them out. But he had permitted them to string their wire up in Maverick Canyon, which branched from the main valley and was part of the Spanish grant, the San Felipe, which he'd bought in order to own his range. In the Maverick, they had done what he told them to

do. They raised the hay that the Long L needed for winter feed, and he bought it from them at a fair price, but never a fat one.

Their only outlet was down through the Saddle, past the big house that John Lanton had built in the valley's narrow entrance in the days when his wife still lived. He governed their lives. They were his vassals, almost as surely as were those who rode for the L.

Lil was saying, "Maybe he thought you'd be man enough to drive the nesters out. Maybe he'd got wind of what was coming, before he died. There's been a big change up there while you've been drifting. The Maverick is full of water now."

"Water? Where have the nesters gone to?"

"They're still up there, waiting. They built a dam across the end of the canyon. There's an engineer—I guess you'd call him a promoter—in town, and he told them what to do. He says the Spanish grant is a worthless piece of paper, and he's going to buy the Saddle from the government and sell it in pieces and then sell irrigation water to the settlers, from the Maverick. The nesters get first choice of the valley land. It's a neat way for them to get back at the L, isn't it?"

Mark got to his feet. "It's a steal, and a thin one at that. Most years there's not enough water in Maverick to irrigate ten acres!"

"There is this year. The snows were heavy in the San Juans, and when they melted, the reservoir filled up in a week."

He brushed that aside. "The blind, fence-stringing fools! Drowning the land we let them use, on the say-so of some dirty—"

"Don't shout at me, Mark." Lil was smiling at him in evident enjoyment. "I was curious about how you'd take this. In some ways you're more like John Lanton than Gid could ever be. You can scowl and rant and yell, but there's nothing underneath it. And there's nothing you can do here. You bowed out of it all, remember?"

"I can dynamite that fool dam. With the Maverick left to me—"

"And flood the whole valley? John Lanton would have had more sense than that. You've got a crazy loyalty to him, but this is 'way over your head. You're a good-time Charlie, a friendly guy who likes to sit in the sun on a corral fence and argue the points of a horse, and buy all the boys a drink afterward. You like to dance, and get into fights that don't mean anything, and make love to pretty girls. But when there's trouble, you want an easy way out, and this time there isn't any."

Mark picked up his hat and stalked from the house. Behind him he heard the silvery peal of Lil Vorhees' vindictive laughter. . . .

AS HE stepped from the porch he wondered how much he owed to the memory of old John Lanton. The answer was: a lot. Mark had never had a name, other than the one John Lanton had given him, nor had he any memory of his own parents. He'd been found in an abandoned wagon far out on the desert by Ben Wale. Prowling Utes had done in his parents, probably; and the team had wandered. Ben had taken him to the L, where John Lanton's wife, whom Mark remembered as a tired-looking woman who scrubbed him fiercely behind the ears morning and night, had insisted that they take him in.

That constituted adoption in those days. But it didn't put Lanton blood in Mark's veins.

Now the ranch that old John had built was Gid Lanton's, and that was as it should be. Mark would make his peace with Gid, and would help save the L. Old John would have wanted it so.

This time there would be no going over the hill.

Busy with his thoughts, Mark almost collided with the man who waited on the plank sidewalk. The hombre loomed big in

the near darkness, and he demanded roughly, "You're Mark Lanton, ain't you?"

"I am." Nettled by the man's tone, Mark added, "If that's any business of yours."

"I'm makin' it so." The man drove a fist into Mark's belly.

Mark was driven back by the force of the blow. His body struck Lil Vorhees' picket fence and hung there as he gasped for breath. The big hombre made a grunt of satisfaction and moved in, fists slashing, jolting Mark first to one side and then to the other.

Pain writhed within Mark. He twisted away, trying only to protect himself while he got his breath back and got his boots planted solidly on the ground. Then he dodged under a wild swing and hammered his opponent's body.

The man fell back, breath gushing noisily from his sagging mouth. Mark's blows were hurting him, and the fury that they put into him made his swings even wilder and left him wide open for real punishment. Mark smiled thinly, recalling the saloon bouts he'd engaged in during the past three years and the things he had learned from them. He shifted his attack from belly to jaw and saw his opponent go down to one knee and come lurching up again.

A solid blow put the big hombre on his back. Mark drew his gun, panting and feeling sweat course down his face, and said, "Get up, mister. We're taking a walk to someplace where I can get a look at you."

There were lamps hanging on the porch of the hotel. Mark prodded the hombre up the steps and backed him against the wall. The man was even bigger than he had seemed. He had a broad, massive build, with arms thickened by hard work. His red hair straggled down over his low brow, pasted there by sweat. His eyes were aglow with hate.

Mark said, "First, I'll have your name. Then a reason for jumping me like you did; and you'd better make it a good one."

"The name's Potter. For the reason, the name you wear'll do. Any time I can belt a Lanton . . ."

Mark looked at the man with narrowing eyes. Potter—there'd been a family by that name, up in the Maverick. They would hate the Lantons, and with reason. This one had the look of a plowman; and he carried no gun at all.

Suddenly a new voice said then, "Potter, you're a damn fool."

Mark glanced toward the doorway and saw a man, who looked about fifty, standing there, thumbs hooked into the pockets of a brocaded vest. He watched Mark over the glowing tip of his cigar.

"That's something I'll agree with," Mark said dryly. "But who're you?"

"The name is Gechell. Frank Gechell." A diamond glinted on the man's hand as he took the cigar from his mouth. "I'm not a man you'll like, Lanton. I'm opening Saddle Valley for settlement."

Mark shrugged and turned back to Potter. "You know a man by name of Scott?" he demanded.

Potter blinked and said slowly, "No, I don't. Who—"

"Never mind." Mark was thinking that Potter was a man with a brooding temper; the action he'd taken against a Lanton was understandable. "How'd you know me, in the dark?"

"Seen you bring a dead man into town. Asked old Rawl if you wasn't Mark Lanton. Seen you a few times before, when my pa pulled his wagon off the road to make way for a Lanton rig."

"All right," Mark said wearily, feeling the old bitterness weave its mesh around him again. "Get out of here."

Potter didn't leave at once. He edged away from Mark's gun, glowered at Gechell and said, "This here's Wild Mark Lanton, the worst of the bunch. You'd best—"

Gechell waved a hand. "I've nothing to fear from him. And don't go off half-cocked again, friend. We've too much at stake."

Potter tramped heavily from the porch and was gone. Mark holstered his gun, measuring Gechell. The man's face was smooth, florid, affably smiling. He had a well-fed look and an air of confidence, of serene belief in himself.

Mark said darkly, "A man tried to kill me in the pass today. And now this Potter made a stab at beating me up. You tried to make out that he's just a hothead, but I'm wondering if you had a part in both attempts."

GECHELL shrugged carelessly. "Think what you like, my young friend. The fact is I don't indulge in anything that crude. I don't have to. Come into the lobby, and we'll have a talk."

Mark gave the man a curious look and followed him inside. They took chairs facing the wide windows, well away from the corner where the night clerk and a drummer were playing checkers. A wiry little man, who had been sitting on the window sill, moved away at Gechell's nod and took up a position against the wall.

"My bodyguard," Gechell said. "Luke Sny. Doesn't look like much, but he's blue blazes with that gun he carries."

"You've got me scared," Mark said sardonically.

"Not trying to, at all. As I told you, I'm opening the valley for settlers. The day of the cattle kings is gone, particularly that of a king whose empire rests on as wobbly a foundation as a Spanish grant."

"I always thought it was pretty solid, Gechell. The San Felipe Grant goes way back to seventeen hundred and something. There's over a hundred thousand acres up there, and John Lanton bought it all."

"He wasn't your father, was he? You were adopted."

"You seem to know a lot about me."

"I do, son, I do. Lanton left you none of the Long L range. He cut you off with Maverick Canyon, which never was used for cattle but was given to the nesters."

"Not given, exactly. He let them live there—"

"As a sop to his conscience? The point is that one man held thousands of acres more than he could possibly use. That sort of thing doesn't go any more. Saddle Valley will support a lot of people, and people are what count. They're coming in, friend, like a tide. This town will be ten times the size it is now. A branch railroad will be built to tap this area. It's progress, and your brother will get nowhere trying to block it. You've no reason to help him, but if you try it, you'll only get hurt."

Mark was thinking about the dry years when the Maverick held only a trickle of water. But he asked, "What do you get out of this?"

"Satisfaction. And a reasonable profit, of course. Now, I'm willing to buy the Maverick from you. What's your price?"

Mark laughed. "Why buy something that's held on what you call a wobbly title? Maybe you're not as sure of your ground as you'd have me believe."

Gechell shook his head. "Not that at all. Gid Lanton doesn't worry me. He's got a tough hand in that new foreman of his but hasn't the sand to turn the man loose, for fear of what might happen to his own hide. But I've heard that you're a fighter. In my experience I've found it cheaper to buy off a man of your sort."

"People," Mark said dryly, "have sure gotten to be frank around this town. Just awhile ago I got told that I did my fighting over nothing at all and that I was a good-time Charlie."

"Sounds like a woman's point of view," Gechell said. "A woman who was trying to be nasty. I make my own estimate of a man. Do we make a deal?"

"No," Mark said, rising, "we don't. Maybe getting accused of being a bum has made me stubborn. You've gone ahead and flooded the Maverick, and you stepped out of line there. My hunch is that you know mighty well there's not water enough for

irrigation, most years. I think you're out to gyp a lot of people besides Gid Lanton. I'm going to look around in the valley tomorrow and see what I can do."

Gechell shrugged and said nothing. Mark stalked over to the desk, waited until the clerk stopped his checker game and came over, and then said, "Howdy, Whitey. I need a room."

The clerk took a key from the rack. Pushing it across the desk he said, "Like the old days, kind of, to have you back." He chuckled. "Only this is the first time, Mark, you ever came in here cold sober!"

Mark turned to the stairs. He remembered the nights when he'd hit town, a young Lanton out for a spree, and had raised some of the hell that had earned him his name, Wild Mark. It seemed tawdry now. He must, he thought sourly, have cut a hell of a figure.

As he went up the stairs, he glanced into the lobby and saw that Luke Sny was still standing by the wall, his thin, dark face thrown back as his eyes followed Mark. Gechell still was in his chair, a cloud of cigar smoke hovering about his head.

When Mark reached his room and started pulling off his boots, he thought once again about Scott, and he regretted now that he'd had to kill the man to stop him. Alive, Scott might have been persuaded to tell who was footing the bill. . . .

CHAPTER TWO

Nester Trouble

IN THE morning Mark had breakfast at the cafe and then went directly to the office of Sam Edgerton, who had been John Lanton's lawyer since Mark's boyhood.

Edgerton wasn't in the office, however. The place had changed: the roll-top desk at the end of the room had been cleared of its foot-deep pile of yellowed papers, there was a carpet on the floor, and a smaller desk had been placed opposite the door. On this desk was a small bouquet of flowers. Behind it was a brown-haired girl who said, "Mr. Edgerton won't be in today. He had to go down to Durango to argue a case. Is there any message you'd like to leave?"

Mark shook his head and turned back to the door.

But her voice, with laughter in it now, halted him there. "Mark Lanton, don't you even know me?"

He looked around, really seeing her for the first time. She was not beautiful at all, in the way Lil Vorhees was beautiful. She was small and slim, the roundness of her body partly restrained by her simple gray dress. Her mouth was wide, yet somehow it was just right for her friendly smile. There were freckles across her nose, and her eyes were so dark a brown that they were almost black, and her lashes weren't accented by makeup as Lil's had always been.

But he didn't know her at all. He said, "I'm sorry, Miss—"

"I'm Nan. Nan Trellew, Mark. Maybe if I had pigtails and had just fallen into a water tank. . . ." She smiled at him again.

He laughed. Sure, he remembered now. There had been a day, two years before he left the Spanish Spur country, when he'd been trying out a fast horse and had ridden abruptly into the draw where one of the Long L windmills was. A nester girl had been sitting on the edge of the big concrete storage tank, her faded gingham skirt hiked up, her spindly legs swishing around in the cool water.

At sight of him, she'd fallen into the tank. He'd fished her out, all wet and bedraggled, with her brown eyes made enormous by the fear that was in them.

She was the daughter of a nester; and nesters stayed off Long L range except for the trips they made out to Spanish Spur, sitting silent in their wagons and staring at the big white Lanton house as they passed it. For the first time, that day,

young Mark Lanton had begun to understand the hate that the nesters held for the big outfit.

He had never seen her again. The nesters kept their womenfolk up in the Maverick, generally; and to them it must have been like a prison.

Now he said, "I'll be darned. You've changed, Nan."

Color came to her cheeks. "I'm twenty now. And you Lantons aren't ogres to me anymore, Mark."

He smiled and nodded toward her desk. "What are you doing here?"

"Earning a living. My folks were killed last year. There was a landslide at the entrance of the Maverick, and it caught them. Old Sam can't pay me much, but I'm saving most of it. I'm getting married in the fall—to Ray Potter. He's big and redheaded, and—"

"I've met him," Mark said. "He's one lucky hombre." He was thinking that Potter probably had no way of knowing how lucky he was. He would have a wholehearted bride, and when she met him at the door in the twilight, her kisses would be ardent, and they'd be for him alone.

She bit her lip. "I'm sorry about . . . about the Long L. No, I'm not either. I guess my loyalty to the other side won't be budged, and I'm like the rest of them, gloating now that the L is on its knees. It's you I'm really sorry about. It wasn't till Sam probated the will that I found out you really weren't a Lanton at all. But you worshipped the ground old John walked on, didn't you?"

"You mentioned loyalty, Nan—I reckon it works both ways. This Gechell hombre, now—how'd he convince the Maverick folks that there'd be enough water to irrigate the valley?"

Her lashes and, for a moment, the poise that womanhood had given her wavered somewhat. "I . . . I guess they wanted to think it. And there's certainly enough water up there this year. He had them all working with teams and the scrapers he bought to build the dam. Now they're all crowded up at the end of the canyon, waiting. There's a case in court somewhere, and Gechell says the Spanish grants are all going to be voided."

"What does Sam Edgerton think about that?"

"I . . . You'll have to talk to him about it. Mark, what are you going to do?"

"I don't know," he said. And he really didn't.

She rose and went with him to the door. In the old days, the gay days, he would have kissed her just to see if those lips were as soft and pliant as they looked. But now a restraint was in him.

She looked at him oddly and said, "Lil Vorhees was up here a few weeks ago, asking if we knew your address. Have you seen her?"

He only nodded, and then he went out and tramped down the long, outside stairway to the street.

HE GOT his horse at Dake Rawl's livery, and rode out to the Long L. Ranch headquarters was placed squarely across the entrance of Saddle Valley, where the expanse of the range was squeezed between narrowing walls. Up above, the valley was twenty miles long and nearly ten wide, and summer thunderstorms brought grass that grew high and fast.

The big house had been given a fresh coat of white paint every spring by grumbling punchers acting on John Lanton's shouted orders. That had been skipped lately, and the place looked dingy. Back of the house were long bunkhouses, a blacksmith shop, a windmill, and stout corrals. In one of the corrals Mark saw some heavy-built whiteface cattle, probably being held there for shipment.

One of the few things John Lanton had worshipped was good stock. He'd pay five thousand dollars for a bull he wanted, but not five cents for a shine on his boots. He

went around in old clothes, looking more like a wandering preacher or a drifting horse trader than a cattle king.

It was hard for Mark to think of him as dead.

Leaving his horse at the hitchrack in front of the house, Mark crossed the porch. The door was open; Gid Lanton was sitting in the little office room off the hallway, talking to Ed Cowley. They both turned at the sound of Mark's boots and spurs, the ramrod's jaw tightening, Gid's handsome blond head lifting, and his face registering resentment.

For a long moment nothing was said. Gid Lanton had a half-empty whisky bottle at his elbow, and his light skin showed the flush of the liquor that was in him. Gid was about as unlike his father as a son could be. Where the Old Man had been gaunt and leathery, able to drain a bottle and show no sign of it except in the way his voice rang through this house as he made plans for the coming year, Gid was round-faced and soft-looking and always showed it when he drank. He had grown a mustache now, and it had come out a taffy color that matched his hair.

He said, "So you came back. What'n hell for?"

"To help you, if you'll let me."

The ramrod jumped up and said, "I'll be getting out to see if old Ben's fallen down on the job of getting those yearlings bunched."

Mark slanted a quick, sizing-up look at the foreman as the man left. He'd been too angry to pay much attention to Cowley last night, but now he saw that the ramrod had more than a stocky build and a look of truculent force about him. Subtly, he seemed a cut above the type who'd take a foreman's job. And his hands were smooth; certainly he hadn't spent years of pounding saddle as a cowhand.

When Cowley was gone, Gid Lanton leaned back in his swivel chair and regarded Mark with narrowed eyes. "To help me, eh? I don't recall sending for you."

"Lil Vorhees sent for me. You might have let me know about the Old Man, Gid."

"How was we to know where you'd drifted to?" Gid drummed his fingers on the desk, then smiled thinly. "So Lil crooked her finger at you again. Seems like there ought to be enough men around here, even for her. Dad always said there was high grade stock an' there was low grade stock. That cheap, misplaced percentage wench is the lowest damn—"

"Stop it," Mark said roughly. The old defeat, he saw, still rankled Gid. He was two years older than Mark, and he had wanted Lil with all the fervor of a scion of wealth desiring a beautiful plaything. Having Mark beat him out had turned his hate against both Mark and the girl.

"Don't go telling me what to do," Gid said in a flat, angry tone. "The Old Man isn't here anymore to rant about how perfect you are. Go back to drifting. It's your style. Stall around a town somewhere and turn loose that friendly grin, work up a reputation with the easy girls. I've got work to do here, an' won't have you in my way. I ran you out once, an' if I have to I'll—"

"You didn't run me out, Gid," Mark said softly. He never had put a name to the feeling that had driven him from Spanish Spur, but certainly it hadn't been built by Gid's wild talk. It had been something else altogether—a growing knowledge that Lil Vorhees was wrong for him, that he never could fully trust her. And a conviction that he didn't belong on the L4, that he was an interloper here, and that he had to get out and put down roots of his own somewhere.

He never had found the place that suited him for that.

PUTTING his palms flat on the desk he said, "If you've finished raking over the past, let's get down to business. I hear Maverick's been turned into a reservoir,

and that the nesters are waiting to move into the valley. I talked to a man named Gechell—"

"A stinking skunk!" Gid snapped. "He's got political connections in Washington, and he got the nesters all excited with his promises."

"Is there anything to this business of the Spanish grants being voided?"

"I don't know an' don't give a damn. I'm ready for 'em, no matter what. Ed Cowley knows the ropes an' he's brought in a whole new crew, tough hands who know how to handle a gun. If those nesters try to move in, it'll be the last move they ever make."

It was typical of Gid, Mark thought then, that he concentrated on the obvious menace and ignored the bigger threat behind it. "That could get you in bad, Gid, with the law. It might be just what Gechell wants. An excuse to call on the Army for help."

"Damn it, what kind of talk is that? I own this valley. Dad bought an' paid for it. Possession is nine points of the law."

Mark shook his head. "That old wheeze doesn't work where the government puts its foot in. Have you seen Edgerton about this?"

"Why would I see him? The Long L's here, right where it's always been." Gid smiled acidly. "What would you have me do, put my tail down an' go to drifting?"

"Hardly. Just take a look at the whole picture, that's all. Something big is building up here, and you've been too busy watching the nesters to see it. A man tried to kill me when I came over the pass yesterday. A man named Scott. Know him?"

"No."

"All right. I hear that I own the Maverick now. Maybe that puts me in a position to help you, and help a lot of other people too. Like it or not, I'm taking a hand here."

Gid peered at him suspiciously. "What'll that buy you? Maverick's no good for anything, an' never was, an' if you got the notion of gettin' the Old Man's will set aside . . ."

The sudden coldness in Mark's eyes stopped Gid there. After a bit Mark shook his head, saying, "I'm sorry for you, Gid. You're stuck here on a ranch that's too big for the size of you, worrying about somebody taking it away from you. It's narrowed your outlook on things. That's one of the good things about drifting—a man hasn't any axe to grind at all, and it gives him a nice, relaxed, don't-give-a-damn look at the world."

He went out of the house and stepped into his saddle. As he reined away, he saw Gid watching him from the office window, and he felt regret because the feeling between them could have been a good one, and wasn't. Another man might have shrugged at Mark's victory with Lil Vorhees, but Gid wasn't built that way.

Mark swore softly to himself. Gid hadn't known how mercenary Lil's scheme had been, and wouldn't be able to see the sardonic humor in its result even if it were told to him.

Gid's trouble was that he never had really grown up. And perhaps Mark could best repay his debt to old John by helping Gid now.

As he passed the bunkhouses, Mark saw a dozen men sitting in the shade. Tough-looking men, with a wary alertness about them. The gunmen Gid had bragged about. But things had changed on the Long L, when a good part of its crew sat around during daylight hours. In the old days, a man who worked for the outfit, pounded his saddle and earned his pay. . . .

Mark rode on, and, in the widening reach of the valley, he quartered toward the entrance of Maverick Canyon. But he saw a bunch of yearling stock being worked by several cowhands and he swung that way. As he neared the cattle, a voice bawled acidly through the swirl of dust, saying, "Go back to settin' by the bunkhouse, mister. The cows don't like your smell!"

Mark chuckled and called, "You'll need some help, Ben, to run me off!"

A horse spurted forward out of the dust. Its rider was a wizened little oldster, who reined up beside Mark and cuffed back his hat. He thrust out a gnarled hand and said, "Well, damn. Well, damn, now! Mark Lanton, come back where he belongs again. Mistook you for one o' them gunslicks at first. Must be my eyesight's failin'. How be you?"

"Not complaining, Ben. How's the cow business?"

"Middlin'. Only four-five of the old crew left, an' we're wore down from tryin' to handle the stock. The others stomped off the place when Gid went to payin' gunhands to sit around on their behinds. Come near to quittin' myself, when that new foreman come in. Gid, he begged me to stay. He said ol' John would have wanted me to. He sets in that office an' drinks the Old Man's whiskey an' thinks it makes him big as his pa was." The oldster spat, indicating his feelings on the subject.

"I hear the nesters are figuring on getting the valley."

"Yeah. There's talk about the grant bein' no good. After all this time! Hell, it don't make sense to shove the L off the range it's built. Me'n the boys, we're hopin' it don't happen. We're a mite old f'r hittin' the grubline."

"Gid's fixing to make a fight of it."

"Hell! If that whiskey-soaked upstart had a army, he wouldn't know what to do with it. You can't run any war with a swivel chair an' a bottle."

Mark hipped over in his saddle and looked toward the distant mouth of the Maverick. He could make out the new, straight line of the top of the dam, stretching across its narrow entrance. "Lot of water penned up there, they tell me," he said.

"Yeah. It'd raise pure hell in the valley if it ever busted loose. They was a big lan'slide up there las' year—reckon that give the engineer his idea for the dam. Mark, what you aimin' to do here? If you was runnin' the L, it'd give a man a better feelin'."

"I'm not, Ben. I'm just a drifter, come back to look over some property that was left to him."

"An' it's under a hundred feet of water!" old Ben snorted as Mark smiled and reined away.

Mark rested his horse twice, on the steep climb up the valley wall to the entrance of the Maverick. As he neared the dam, he saw that it had been solidly built, of rock and earth. Whatever else Frank Gechell might be, he was a good engineer. Topping the climb at last, Mark pushed back his hat and stared at what had been Maverick Canyon.

It was a lake now. Above the entrance, the walls swung apart to a width of nearly a mile, and all that width was filled with water. The lake reached back into the mountains, following the twisting course of the canyon, its surface stirred to ripples by the breeze.

There was no guard at the dam. None was needed. This mass of water was a silent threat to Saddle Valley, and if it ever were turned loóse, it would tear the grass from the range and then gather itself at the valley's lower end, wiping out all that John Lanton had built in his lifetime.

A NEW trail twisted along the cliffs at one side of the canyon, and Mark followed it. Finally he reached the end of the lake, where the tips of drowned trees showed above the surface. Some distance beyond, in a stand of pinyon pines, he saw the nester camp.

It was a squalid collection of tents and shacks made from lumber salvaged from other shacks whose sites now were far under water. Ragged washing hung on lines that sagged between the trees. Hungry-looking children played about the tents. Mark Lanton felt a stir of pity for these people who had cut off their means

of scanty livelihood to snatch at the bait that had been offered by Gechell.

The camp was guarded. A man stepped out to block Mark's way, lifting a rifle and making a shout that brought other men running to back him. The guard was a vigorous-looking man in his forties, with dirty suspenders thrust apart by his bulging chest. He scowled and demanded, "What you want here?"

Mark tilted back his hat and made his smile include the group. "I'm Mark Lanton. Wanted to talk a bit."

They scowled at him. Among the others, he saw Ray Potter, his face showing lumpy bruises, his mouth drawn taut by the sight of the man who had given him a beating. The guard said, "Mark Lanton, eh? We heard you was back. Well, I'm Trem Ansler, leader here. Start talkin'."

"Have you thought this through?" Mark asked mildly. "Have you figured a way around the fact that the Maverick, most years, hasn't got enough water to irrigate a patch of potatoes?"

"It's got water now," Ansler said. "Gechell, he says water draws water, an' with the dam—"

"Gun that smilin' devil!" Potter shouted furiously. "He's here to make trouble. He's killed a man already an' he'll block us if we don't get him first. All our lives we've bowed our heads to those damn Lantons, an' now's our chance to—"

"Let it be, Potter," Ansler said. "He come here peaceable an' he'll leave the same way. Better do it now, Lanton. Do your talkin' to Gechell, an' don't try comin' up here again. We ain't partial to strangers, much less Lantons. Only outsider we ever let in here was the feller Gechell sent with that big camera box for takin' pictures. He—"

But the hate that had built within Ray Potter wasn't being stopped now. The man crouched, whipping out the gun that had been thrust under the waistband of his levis.

Mark's lean frame tightened, and his hand slapped the stock of his own weapon. A gun duel was the last thing he had wanted here, but there seemed no way to avoid it now.

But a girl's voice cried sharply, "Stop it! Ray, put that gun down!"

Nan Trellew's voice. The scorn in it seemed to sting Ray Potter, and he lowered his weapon. Mark glanced around and saw that the girl was sitting on a livery stable horse just behind him and slightly to one side. She rode astride, the skirt of her gray dress drawn tight on her thighs, her mouth tightened by angry determination, a pearl-handled ladies' revolver in her hand.

It had been the fact that any lead thrown at Mark might strike her instead, rather than any threat of her gun, that had stopped Potter.

And now the red-headed man was swearing. "Mark Lanton, the ladies' man," he said bitterly. "Might of knowed he could always get a skirt to back 'im up!"

"Ray!" Nan Trellew cried. "I was only trying to keep you from making a fool of yourself. Killing can make trouble—"

"Except when your friend Lanton does it, eh?" Potter's mouth pulled into a knowing smirk. "I got to hand it to you, mister. It don't take you long, where a gal's concerned. I always figured, when Nan insisted on movin' herself to town an' takin' a room at the hotel, that she'd keep her eyes open. For drummers, maybe. Never thought she would get so plumb impartial that a Lanton could—"

"Ray, how can you even think . . ." Nan's angry voice died, and her face whitened. She stared at Potter as if she couldn't quite believe what she saw in him now. Then she reined her horse away, saying in a tight voice, "We'd best get out of here, Mark. Both of us."

The nesters made no move to stop them. Nan sent her horse darting along the trail, seemingly blind to the risk of a fall from the cliffs. Not until they reached the dam,

where they could look out across the broad expanse of Saddle Valley, did she draw rein.

"I'm sorry," Mark said as he halted his horse beside hers.

"So am I." She lifted her head, swinging her wind-blown hair away from her face. "No, I'm not either. It . . . it gave me a look at something in Ray. Something I didn't know was there."

"Just a case of temper runnin' away with a man," Mark said gently.

She gave him a tiny, fleeting smile. "Don't try to gloss it over. It was ugly. This is the end of something I'd planned on, and that's that. I wanted to be married—every girl does—and Ray seemed a good practical choice. Maybe I was too darned practical about it."

"Why did you come out here today?"

"Because of you. I didn't have much to do at the office and I got to thinking. I had a hunch you'd come up here, and that if you did, there'd be trouble. I left in a hurry, didn't even take time to go to my room and change to proper riding clothes." She laughed a little. "I'm always doing some fool thing on impulse."

"There'd have been trouble if you hadn't shown up. But it was dangerous for you."

"Maybe I like a little danger. Maybe I—"

Mark had been challenged by women before. He put an arm about Nan's slim body and drew her to him, crooking a finger under her chin to tilt her startled face up for his kiss. For a moment when neither of them breathed she clung to him. Then her eyes opened wide, and her hands made tiny fists that pushed against his shoulders. She turned her head away, saying, "No, Mark, I . . . I didn't mean that the way it sounded at all. You're very expert, but I'll not have you making love to me. I know all about Lil Vorhees, and about Ed Cowley—word gets around in a little place like Spanish Spur, especially with an old gossip like Dake Rawl watching her house from across the street. I'll not be just a . . . a substitute, Mark."

"Girl," he said, releasing her, "I . . ." But he had no words now, for the new feeling that was in him. This had been poorly timed, yet Nan's breathing was hurried, and color had rushed to her cheeks, and there was about her a strange sort of beauty that he never had seen in a woman before. Something that went beyond perfection of face and figure, something that called to him. . . .

She tugged at her skirt, trying to bring it lower on her thighs, and gave him an embarrassed smile and then kicked her horse.

CHAPTER THREE

Blasting Guns

THEY RODE together down the valley. As they passed the Long L house, he reined aside, telling her that he wanted to see Gid again. As he rode alone to the house, he wondered if Nan had the same shaken feeling that was in him now.

There were two horses at the ranchhouse hitchrack, one of them carrying a sidesaddle that caused Mark to stare at it curiously as he stepped down. Gid Lanton was not in the office when he reached it. Cowley sat in the swivel chair, and Lil Vorhees was perched on a corner of the desk, swinging her legs and laughing with him about something.

Their laughter stopped when Mark's rangy frame filled the doorway. Mark said dryly, "You're on thin ice, Lil. If Gid catches you here, he'll call you some names."

Lil shrugged. "He rides out to look over the range, this time of day. Because old John always did that."

But a step sounded on the porch, and then Gid was in the hallway behind Mark. "Seen you ride down the valley with the Trellew girl," Gid said. "Seen you head

over here. What is it you want this . . ." He stopped. Mark had stepped aside, smiling, so that Gid could see Lil Vorhees. Gid's face darkened, and he shouted, "What in blazes are you doing in this house? Get out! You too, Ed! Get off that chair an' do some work for a change!"

Cowley rose, unruffled, and walked from the room. Lil slipped lithely from the desk, drawing on a pair of long white gloves. She wore a prim-looking dress today, one with a demurely high neck and many buttons, but one that was molded to her lush figure. She tilted a pouty smile to Mark and said, "Maybe I just wanted to see my old friend Mark."

"You'll not be carryin' on with him here!" Gid said furiously.

Lil laughed at him. "You're drunk, Gid. And you're a sorry looking thing to be master of the Long L. You should have married me, after you chased Mark out. I'd have made something of you."

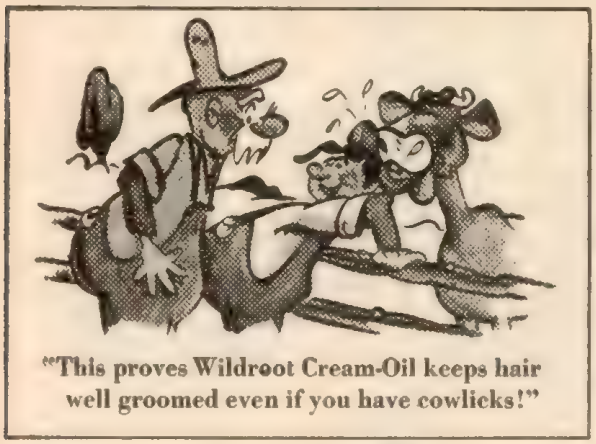
A muddy anger stirred in Gid's eyes. "Now that's a hot one," he sneered. "Me marry the likes of—"

Lil's smile held a wicked triumph. "But you knew you just weren't man enough for me, didn't you? Mark beat you out with me and he'll beat you out for the ranch. He gets what he goes after."

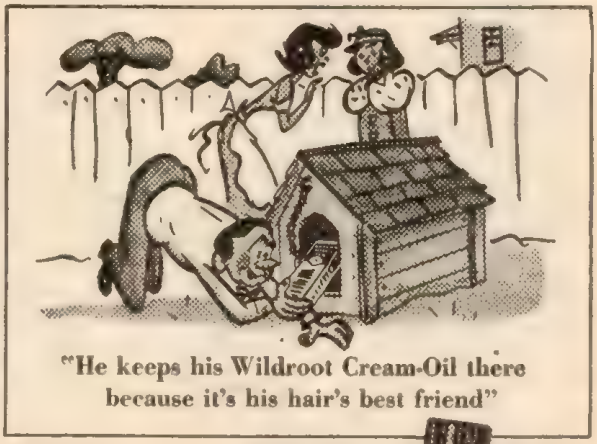
Gid blinked as the girl's words soaked into his whisky-fogged brain. He swayed, his face seeming to swell with the blood that rushed to it, and he said thickly, "I'll fix that right now!"

He went for his gun. But the move was clumsy; Mark grabbed the weapon, wrenched it free and tossed it aside. He slapped Gid then, fast open-handed blows that whipped Gid's head from side to side, and backed him against the door jamb. Gid seemed stunned, confused—he made no resistance.

"Get some sense!" Mark said. "Can't you see that she's just trying to stir trouble



"This proves Wildroot Cream-Oil keeps hair well groomed even if you have cowlicks!"



"He keeps his Wildroot Cream-Oil there because it's his hair's best friend"

"Since using Wildroot Cream-Oil I look twice as good!"

BEAMER KELLER

between us?" He swung and put a level glance upon Lil. "It didn't work, Lil. Now you'd better be leaving."

She gave him one hate-filled look and then left the house, her high heels clicking down the hallway and across the porch.

Gid said, "Damn you, Mark, don't ever rough me up again. I'll . . . Why'd she want to get us in a row?"

Mark shrugged. "She's a woman. She had a big scheme, and it fell through, and I left her, and now she wants to hit me any way she can. Gid, get this; I don't want the L. It's rightly yours, and I'm going to help you hold it. What I came here to tell you is that I think I see through Gechell's game."

"What you mean? He's just out to grab the valley, split it up an' sell it."

"To those nesters? There's not a dollar in the bunch of them, nor in a hundred like them that he could bring in. He'd have to help them along, buy wire and plows for them, get his money back in dribbles over a long time—if there was enough water to make the thing work, which there won't be. No, he's out to make a quick killing and get clear of it."

Gid only stared, stupidly. Mark said, "Think it over when you get sobered up And sit tight till you hear from me."

WHEN MARK rode into Spanish Spur, it was evening. Sam Edgerton, a polished little oldster with dandified attire, was getting stiffly from a buggy at the livery.

"Dake was just telling me you'd come back," the lawyer said. "Staying?"

"A man never knows, Sam. I want to talk to you about that Spanish grant business."

Edgerton brushed dust from his coat. "The grants are all under a cloud. Ownership of one down in New Mexico was challenged, and the lower court upheld the challenge. About that time, Gechell showed up here—I take it you know about him. Since then the Court of Appeals has reversed the decision, and now it's with the Supreme Court. Our man Gechell has political connections in Washington and he counts on the things swinging his way, counts on getting the San Felipe from the government for a nickel an acre."

"What are the chances it'll go as he wants?"

"About nine to one it won't. The court of appeals' decision upset him considerably, but by then he was into it too deep to stop. Even if the decision does go against the grants, your foster-brother can still hold the valley by right of use. That is, provided he doesn't get rattle-headed and take some action that'll put him in a bad light."

"I'll see that he doesn't," Mark said.

Edgerton peered at him. "It's an odd thing—you haven't got old John's blood but you've got the steel that was in him. Come to my office in the morning to sign the papers on the transfer of the Maverick."

Mark nodded and walked with Edgerton to the lawyer's house, and then went on to the cafe. He knew what he had to do, now. And the first move was to get Gechell's gunman, Luke Sny, out of the way.

When he finished his meal, he went to the hotel. But Nan Trellew rose from a chair on the porch and slipped her arm through his, saying, "Walk with me, Mark. I'm all upset and need somebody to talk to."

They walked slowly, talking about impersonal things—the towns Mark had seen, the people in them, the fact that Spanish Spur had changed but little since the old days. As they passed the Silver Wheel Saloon, they saw Lil Vorhees inside, counting the money in the cash drawer. She glanced at them through the window and then looked away.

They had reached the outskirts of town and had turned back when Mark saw the slight, wiry figure of Luke Sny moving along the other side of the street. Mark

disengaged Nan's arm and said, "Something I've got to do, Nan. Right now."

"Mark, oh, Mark, be careful!" Her voice had a breathy sound; the feeling in it pulled him around, and he smiled to reassure her and then he went on.

He circled back and crossed the street, moving up swiftly and silently in the darkness behind Sny. Dake Rawl was having some trouble with a horse in the lighted doorway of his livery; Sny's attention was on that, and the man seemed not to notice Mark's presence until Mark's gun jabbed his back.

"Over here," Mark said, shoving Sny roughly into the gap between the buildings. "Put your hands up against the wall there." He pulled Sny's gun from its holster and warned, "Careful, now. You're not Gechell's man any more, friend. Got a horse at the livery, haven't you?"

"Yes. Mister, this'll—"

"Get it! I'll be watching and I'll have this gun on you till you're clear of town. Don't come back. Gechell's game is finished, you'll draw no more pay from him."

The slight gunman moved. He went to the livery and a few minutes later he rode out of the town, not looking back.

MARK grinned faintly and holstered his gun, dropping the weapon he had taken from Sny. This had been easy—too easy, perhaps, but there was no time to worry about that now. He crossed to the hotel, moving now with the lithe ease of a prowling wolf, and found that Gechell was not in the lobby. He got the number of the man's room from the clerk—it was a measure of the Lanton influence that still lingered here, that he got the information without an argument—and went upstairs.

Gechell's door was locked. Mark put a shoulder to it, and there was a sound of splintering wood. A moment later he was inside.

He found what he sought in the drawer of the writing table. There were letters, pictures of the dam and the lake behind it and of the wide reach of Saddle Valley. He was striking matches for light to read the letters by when a small sound warned him and he swung to face the door, hand dropping his gun.

Frank Gechell entered the room, saying thickly, "A little prowling, eh, Lanton? And what is it you find?"

"Plenty," Mark said. "You weren't aiming to help those nesters at all. You were dickering to sell the whole thing to a syndicate back East. These pictures made it look good, didn't they? You thought you had the whole thing figured. When the courts voided the grants, your Washington friends would see to it that you owned the valley next morning, and you could sell and get out. The syndicate could sell it in parcels or operate it themselves, as they chose. But your luck's turned against you, friend. It's going against you in the courts and it's gone against you here. Sny isn't around any more to back you."

"I saw him leave," Gechell said. "A disappointment. I didn't think he'd scare that easily. How did you manage it?"

The question was a blind. Gechell's hand dipped to the pocket of his vest, and a derringer glinted in the faint light.

Mark's gun filled the room with sound. Gechell's body was jolted, and for a moment he swayed there, derringer spilling from his fingers, his face pulled down by invisible fingers of despair. Then he twisted around and fell heavily to the floor.

Mark holstered his gun and knelt beside the man, finding that he was dead. Mark still was kneeling, regretting the fact that he'd had to kill twice since his return to this country, when there was a hurried movement in the dark beside him, and his gun was snatched from the holster.

He wheeled and saw that it was Lil Vorhees in the room, holding his gun leveled and smiling her triumph. She was not alone, though. Luke Sny leaned against

the door jamb, a gun in his hand and an expression of smoky-eyed scorn on his face.

"You were right about one thing, mister," Sny said. "I wasn't Gechell's man any more. He just thought I was."

Sny pushed himself away from the door. Mark saw him coming, saw that upraised gun and tried to dodge it, tried to grapple with the man. But Sny was too quick. The heavy barrel descended in a slashing arc, and Mark felt its impact and spilled down into empty darkness.

It was the light that hurt his eyes. At first it was only a blinding, formless glare, but when it came into focus, he saw that it was a lamp, placed on a desk with a half-empty whiskey bottle beside it.

The voices came into focus, too. There was Gid Lanton's angry growl, and Lil Vorhees' soft tones, and Cowley's rumble. Mark had been dumped in a corner of the office at the Long L. Gid sat in his swivel chair, his face gray with hopelessness. Lil perched once again on the corner of the desk, with the stocky Long L ramrod beside her. Sny stood against the wall, along with two other men—gunmen whom Mark had seen lounging in the shade of the Long L bunkhouse.

When Mark got dizzily to his feet, Sny was prompt about putting a gun on him. Mark ignored it, saying, "I've been a fool, Lil. I concentrated on Gechell, when I should have been watching you."

"Ease down, Mark," Gid said miserably. "They got us. Cowley an' the floozie here. They got the ranch loaded with gunslicks that I thought was hired to make a stand aginst Gechell. We got to sign over the Maverick an' the valley, or—"

"Sign nothing!" Mark said. "It's a grab for something she tried to get before. Gechell came in handy, didn't he, Lil? Gave you an excuse to have your man Cowley bring in a gun crew that would do what you told them. And with Sny bought off, you could put Gechell out of the way any time you wanted. I underestimated you, Lil. The Maverick, with all that water in it, took your eye too, so you sent for me and put a man in the pass to kill me. A risky deal all around—how were you swinging the legal end of it?"

"You'll sign your interest over, and Gid will sign his. Then you can take him away from here and show him the joys of drifting."

Mark shook his head. "Lil, you're all devil. You don't aim for either Gid or me to get out of here alive."

Her lower lip pulled down, her teeth showing in what might have been a smile. She didn't look at him. "All right, Mark. You're dead. It would be too risky any other way. You shouldn't have walked out on me, Mark. . . . But you'll sign, anyway. You see, there's another matter. You're quite a ladies' man, and your latest conquest is that spindly Trellew girl. Wild Mark Lanton, fooling around with the sweet-little-girl type! She's here, Mark. We brought her along, and she's upstairs right now, and if—"

Mark said in a rush of anger, "Lil, you've gone pretty low; or else you're pretty near to being crazy."

"And what," she asked acidly, "are you going to do about it?"

"I'll sign," Mark said. "If you'll guarantee that Nan can leave."

Lil slipped from the desk and faced him, her hand sliding some papers across the desk in front of Gid. "I've waited for this," she breathed. "I've wanted to see that hopeless look on your face. I wasn't good enough for you. That's the real reason you left, wasn't it? But things are different now, Mark. She glanced down, taking a pen from an inkwell.

Mark leaned over and swept the lamp to the floor. He thought of Nan, and of the deluded nesters up in the Maverick. And he thought about the places he'd been—one of the nice things about drifting was that a man had so little to lose. . . .

He heard the prompt bark of Sny's

gun and felt the impact of the lead that struck his body. The slug upset his balance, and he went down, seeing the lamp shatter on the floor, hearing Lil's shrill scream in the sudden darkness.

GUNS were blasting, and their orange flame was lacing the room now. Mark shouted, "Down, Gid!" and then hurled himself toward the spot where Cowley had been, slamming against the man and hearing the ramrod's startled oath, wrenching the man's gun from his hand.

Mark swung, fear tightening in him as he realized that the rising glow of the fire was behind him and that he made a perfect target for Sny and the others now. But there was no need for haste. Men crowded the doorway of the office—tough old men who had ridden for the L for years. Ben Wale had his gun against Sny's side, and his companions were covering the other two, the new hands who had been placed on the L by Cowley and Lil.

Ben was saying, "Careful now, gents. Avery, get their irons an' then see to stompin' out that fire. There's plenty sand outside."

One of the new hands began, "When the rest of the boys get here, you old blockhead—"

"They'll stay where they're at awhile," Wale said. "Thought we was so old an' busted-down we didn't count, hey? Well, we kept close tabs on what went on around here, an' when we seen Mark an' the girl brought in, we went to that bunkhouse, caught 'em in a card game an' got the drop. They're tied right secure, now. Mark, you might be helpin' Gid. He looks as though he needs it."

Gid Lanton was behind the desk, struggling to rise. Mark helped him up and saw that there was a lot of blood on Gid's right shoulder. His arm dangled useless-

(Continued on page 110)

oh-oh, Dry Scalp!

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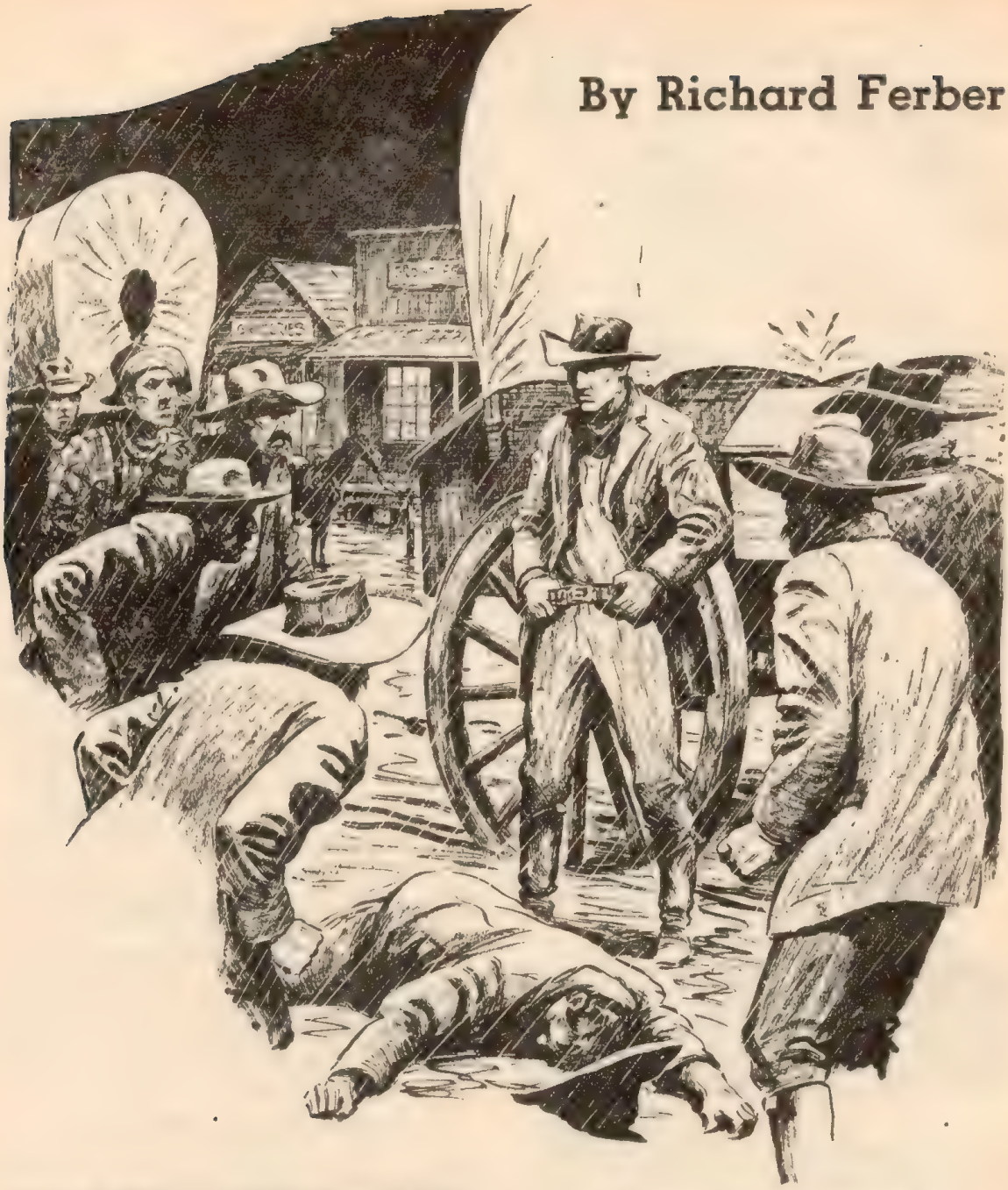
By Richard Ferber



They were staring at him now, the hatred plain in their eyes.

PAY-OFF IN CEDARVILLE

THE rain was moving down in a slow, thick blanket of mist. Matt Lattimore leaned against the sagging wagon, his tall body relaxed, watching the water begin to drop off his hat, and watching, indifferently, the group of men on the board side-walk across the street. There were

twenty or so of them, huddled together soaked to the skin by the incessant Oregon rain. They were having a meeting, Matt saw and was amused.

He had come almost two thousand miles with these men and yet he still didn't like them. These settlers were like all the rest. There wasn't a one of them who could do anything without calling a meeting first. Meet and talk, meet and talk, that's all they could do, and he'd gotten sick of it. But it didn't matter now. He was through with them now. He'd guided them from Bellevue to this muddy, slushing hole called Cedarville, Oregon Territory, and that was as far as his contract ran. They owed him three hundred dollars and when he got that he would be through, with no regrets. Or hardly any regrets.

No cowman hated the settlers as much as did Matt Lattimore. Yet—strangely—there came the time when Matt was ready and willing to toss in his life to back their desperate play!

He looked down the line of the wagon train, parked there in the deep mud of the main street, to where the women stood hunched together in the rain. They were usually like chickens, he thought, scratching and clucking—only now they were too cold and wet to talk or move around much. A little away from them, he saw the girl, Beth, alone, standing stiffly in the rain. Even at that distance and through the heavy blanketing of moisture, he could see her dark beauty. He watched her for a moment, smiling hesitantly, not sure that she was smiling back. But that didn't matter either. She was the kind of woman that he had never really known, and he wisely turned his thoughts from her. He knew another kind of woman, and in the long run she would be no more expensive.

He pulled the jacket of the blanket-coat up closer around his neck and in so doing noticed that the settlers had left the sidewalk and were coming across the street toward him.

When they pulled up in front of him, it was old Jake Willoughby, their leader, who spoke. "Lattimore, we got something we want to talk about," he said, with the blunt, methodical speech so typical of farmers.

"Pay me my money and we got nothing to talk about, Mr. Willoughby," Matt said curtly. The dampness had begun to move into his bones, irritating him and making him restless.

"That's just it, the money," Willoughby said. He stopped, hesitating, and shifted from one foot to the other. He turned back to look at the men behind him. Matt leaned back against the wagon again and studied the faces of the settlers without interest.

"About the money, Lattimore," old Willoughby went on, his voice mild and humble, "We ain't got as much left as we figured on."

Lattimore pushed himself away from the wagon and took an angry step toward the men. "You're not trying to tell me you haven't got my money, are you, Mr. Willoughby?" he demanded roughly.

"No, it ain't that," the old man said quickly, then stopped short again. He was lost, stumbling for his words.

"It was three hundred dollars when I signed on at Bellevue," Matt continued, ignoring the man's struggle. "Pay me what you owe me and I'll be at the nearest saloon if you want to do any more talking."

Willoughby smiled softly, but without humor. When he spoke again, his voice was mild and so low that Matt had to strain to hear him.

"I'm 'shamed to say this, Mr. Lattimore. I ain't one to ask any man for what isn't

mine. We got your money, the money we promised to pay you when you got us to Cedarville. You done your part. Trouble is, three hundred dollars is about all we got."

Lattimore leaned forward, staring hard into the man's face. "You're not trying to work the price down, are you, Willoughby?" he asked impatiently.

"It's like this, Mr. Lattimore," Willoughby went on meekly, ignoring the interruption. "Folks here say this ain't no ordinary rain, not like we know at home. Likely to go on this way for months. That means we can't plant any wheat till it lets up. We didn't figure on that, Mr. Lattimore. We ain't got enough money to buy food until harvest time comes."

"You should have thought of that before you left," Matt said. He looked down the street. It was growing dark, and, in a few buildings, lights were beginning to go on.

"We ain't asking you to give us anything, Mr. Lattimore," Willoughby said, "We're just asking if maybe you couldn't wait."

MATT swung back to the man and stared at him for a moment, thinking. "You're crazy, Willoughby," he said. "I gave up a season on the Green to make this trip, and I didn't do it just to see this God-forsaken country." He stopped his eyes moving slowly to the men huddled behind Willoughby. He studied their faces. He knew none of these men well. They were all the same to him. Middle-aged farmers mostly, like Bill Kincaid, Hollis Rayner, and Nate Murtagh, whose wife had died in child-birth two days out of Pierres Hole. Grubbing, plodding farmers who could think of nothing but a hundred and sixty acres of land and the four walls of a cabin. He said: "I'm sorry for you men, but we made a deal. I've got myself to think about."

"It ain't as though we were asking you to give it to us Lattimore," somebody yelled from the crowd.

Matt set himself back against the wagon and tried patiently to roll himself a cigarette. He got halfway through, found that the paper had become too wet, and let the tobacco dribble slowly from his fingers.

"Why don't you try buying on credit," he said, without looking up.

"We tried that." It was Kincaid who spoke. "Only one fella in town that's got any wheat to sell, and he's sellin' too much to trust anybody for it."

Lattimore shrugged his shoulders irritably. He didn't like this. He'd spent his life taking what was his and not asking anything more, but he was being driven into a corner now, and it made him angry. He returned the stare of the crowd, defiantly, not speaking. Willoughby watched him for a moment, mouth half-open, then let his breath out suddenly and reached inside his slicker.

"All right, son," he said wearily. "Here's your money. You earned it. We ain't got no right to keep it from you."

Matt stepped forward and took the money from the old man. It was dark now, the only light on the street coming faintly from the saloon and the few stores that had stayed open late to accommodate the new settlers. Lattimore paused for a minute, counting the money carefully. When he started away, he heard a man say: "We weren't asking for charity, Mr. Lattimore," but there was a humble, almost begging quality in his voice. Matt started to swing away, and then somebody behind him called sharply: "Mr. Lattimore!"

He recognized the voice. It was Beth Kincaid's younger brother, Sam. He turned back again, waiting, only half-seeing in the darkness of the street. He saw young Kincaid shoulder his way through the crowd of settlers and stop in front of him, ten feet away. In the dim light he could see the excitement on the boy's face.

"Mr. Lattimore!" the kid called again, too loudly for the distance that separated them. "Mr. Lattimore, you ain't gonna let us starve out here even before we get started, are you?"

Matt hesitated. He let his eyes run over the boy. He was big for his age, heavy and wide-shouldered, with an impulsiveness that age hadn't yet tempered. He was standing there now, eager to fight. Without turning to the crowd, Matt said: "Kincaid, tell your boy to move off. He's crowdin' me too close."

The huddled group of settlers stirred, and then old Kincaid called quietly. "Samuel, you come back here. Mr. Lattimore's right."

"It ain't what I call right," Sam Kincaid answered defiantly. "There ain't nothin' right about *this* man."

Matt shrugged his shoulders tiredly. The anger had suddenly gone out of him. In the dimness he could see the faces of the settlers, weary and frightened. They were huddled like cattle against a blizzard, each too weak to stand by himself, and he struggled with the contempt that the felt for them, a contempt, and a certain knowledge that they were everything that he wasn't. He let his gaze move back to the boy momentarily; then abruptly he started away from them.

He heard old Kincaid yell, "Sam!" behind him and he spun back, then rolled away when he felt the jar of Sam Kincaid's body. He stepped into the darkness near the wagon, saw Kincaid's form and brought his fist crashing into the boy's body. He heard Sam groan and saw him come forward, head down. He brought his knee up, felt the sickening crunch when it struck the boy's face, then sidestepped quickly and dragged him back against the wagon. The boy's head hit the hard wheel, and he groaned again, then slumped out of Lattimore's grasp.

Some of the men had left the group and had come toward him, but they stopped when he turned back to them. They were angry, but most of them weren't violent men. He knew that. They would rather go on talking as long as there was anything left to say. They were staring at him now, the hatred plain in their eyes, but it moved him little. He shifted his hat back down on his head again, turned away from them and found his horse, two wagons down the train. He moved it clear of the wagons, got one foot in the stirrup and saw Beth Kincaid again, still standing near the group of women. She was watching him, and for a moment he meant to go to her, but the mare sidled away from him, and when he brought it under control and looked back, she had disappeared into the darkness of the wagons. He swung into the saddle then, a little relieved, laughed at the softness of his own thoughts.

He found a livery stable and when he had given orders about the mare, he moved down the street until he came to the hotel. It was a log structure, two stories high, thrown together hurriedly when the settlers had first started pouring into the territory. He got a room and went back out into the street, looking for a bath and a warm place where he could drink.

It was still raining, and he hurried now, suddenly anxious. He found the word BATH painted on the window of the New Oregon Saloon and he went inside, feeling immediately the pleasant rush of warm air and the strong, biting smell of whisky. He moved to the bar, thirsty now, and for the moment oblivious of the people. He drank steadily for half an hour, feeling only the slow, gradual effects of the liquor, then moved toward the back room where he bought himself a bath.

Only after he had finished his bath did he look around the New Oregon Saloon. It was like all the other saloons he had seen, the same people: well-dressed men who made a living with their money; trappers celebrating before the big fall hunt began; a few settlers who'd been lucky enough to have a little money left when they arrived in Oregon. He turned his mind away from the settlers and watched the women at the bar, the dance hall girls, the typical women that he had seen so many

times before. He studied them carefully, and finding one that he liked, he moved toward her.

But he got halfway to her and changed his mind. Perhaps it was too early in the evening. Perhaps he hadn't got the chill out of his bones yet, or the gritty taste of trail dust from his mouth. He moved to another part of the bar, ordered a glass of whisky and stood impatiently, waiting for the effects of the liquor to come to him.

THE drunkenness was slow in coming. He drank rapidly, waiting for the warmth, trying to contrast the way he felt now with the way it had been those long cold three months on the trail. It should have been like the coming of summer after a long winter in the Klondike, but somehow the feeling wasn't the same. He thought of the settlers, thought of them huddled in the steady drizzle of their promised land, and suddenly, unconsciously, he laughed out loud. He looked around him, surprised at the sound of his voice, and saw the woman he had noticed before watching him. He returned her stare, knowing that she was part of this night and that sometime before morning he would want her company . . . hers, or some other woman's. He thought of Beth Kincaid then, and he swallowed his drink fast, feeling the burning coarseness of it. He said to the barkeep, "The bottle," took it, and moved toward the tables where the card games were going on.

He drank often from the bottle and played loosely and badly. It was almost midnight when he saw that his money was practically gone. He continued playing, betting crazily to an inside straight, lost, and got up from the table, his head reeling savagely from the whiskey. He moved toward the bar, thirsty again, and then stopped dead still. He dug his hands deep into the pockets of his jeans, searching for the three hundred dollars, forgetting for a moment that it was gone. He stared dumbly at the faces around him, deaf to the noise of the saloon. Far back in his mind he could hear old Willoughby saying, "We ain't asking you to give us anything, Mr. Lattimore, we're just asking if maybe you couldn't wait." He saw the woman leave the bar and come toward him, smiling, and he wheeled about, crossed the room quickly and somehow found the door.

Outside the coldness of the air struck him violently. He pulled the coat up around him, took his bearings and moved unsteadily toward the hotel. Down the street he could see the settlers' wagons, barely visible in the darkness, standing drenched and still. He dropped his head, his eyes searching vainly for the puddles of the street. When he came to the sidewalk again, he moved down it slowly, his boots scuffing hollowly on the loose boards. He had come to the corner of the hotel building when he heard a woman's voice say: "Matthew."

He stepped back, his hand going instinctively to the butt of the dragoon pistol. Then he saw a woman come out of the shadows and stand before him. He said, "Who is it?" knowing from the voice and from the shape of the figure in the darkness that it was Beth Kincaid. He stood still, listening to the steadiness of her breathing and the uncertainty of his own, waiting for her to speak. When she did, her words surprised and hurt him.

"Father found some coffee, Matthew," she said softly. "Roasted coffee. If you come to the wagon, I can make you some."

"I've had all the drinking I can use," he said meanly. He stopped there, waiting for her to go on, knowing that they had nothing really to say to each other. He had said it all that afternoon to Willoughby, and old Kincaid and the rest of the settlers, and more especially to her brother. He had said it plainly enough and he was surprised that she was here. There could never be anything between them because he would never like the monotony of a plow and a garden patch and the drab, friendly talk of neighbors.

He said, "I wish you luck," and started to move away. She stopped him, putting one hand on his arm, and even in the darkness he could see the softness of her face.

"I'm sorry, Matt," she said quietly. "It wasn't fair of them to ask you."

"It was their way of being right," he said. "Saying no was mine."

But he knew then that he was wrong, and knowing it made the resentment rise in him again. He moved away from her, not seeing her now, and only partly conscious of the warmth of her presence.

"That hasn't changed anything for me, Matt," she said. The friendliness hadn't left her voice. He became aware of the intensity of her eyes and for a moment he sensed the softness of her.

Then he said, "I signed on at Bellevue for three hundred dollars. Now it's gone. We've got nothing more to talk about now."

He left her then, moving quickly down the board walk toward the door of the hotel. Once, as he stepped into the lobby, he thought he heard her call him, but he didn't turn back. He found his key and went up the stairs, his mind working heavily and uncertainly.

When he left the hotel in the morning, there was the same steady drizzle, and he stopped on the sidewalk for a moment to watch it thoughtfully. The rain would keep up for weeks like this, he had been told, and felt annoyed. Back on the Siskaddee now the first fall snows would be on the ground, the air would be clear, and there was all the country a man could travel in. For a moment he thought of heading back that way; perhaps it wasn't too late to get in part of a season of trapping, but he dismissed it from his mind. He lacked the money now to buy traps, or powder, or enough mules to get him through the winter, and the beaver were going fast from the Green, and he knew suddenly that that part of him he had left behind. It was done, just as so many parts of his life were done; there were too many hills he had crossed, and too many hills ahead of him. It was easier to leave a place, cross this hill and go on to the next one.

He stood idly, letting his eyes roam slowly over the drab, fronted buildings of the town. Down the street the wagon train of settlers was getting ready to pull out, and the sight of it brought back the events of the day before. He pushed the memory away, angry with himself for this weakness.

The wagon train started up and began to go past him down the street, the wagons creaking loudly in the muted stillness of the morning. They were old wagons, beaten almost into splinters by the hard overland passage, but they seemed no less beaten than the men that they carried, or the men that rode or walked alongside them. He saw the Kincaid wagon go by and he saw Beth Kincaid sitting at the front, her eyes fixed on the oxen in front of her. Old man Kincaid came up, saw him, and turned his horse sharply toward the sidewalk. Matt started to move away, saw that he was too late, and settled back against the side of the hotel. Kincaid reined in his horse in front of him, settled in the saddle, and stared reflectively at the passing wagon train.

"You wouldn't think folks like that could come so far, would you, Matthew," he said slowly.

"Those were my thoughts," Lattimore answered him.

The old man was silent for a moment, his mind absorbed in thought. Then he said: "Some'll make it. There's some that won't. These things never turn out the way you expect 'em to, Lattimore."

Matt didn't answer him. The old man was talking to himself, mostly.

"There's some will say we should a stayed where we was," Kincaid went on. "Come winter, if we ain't got no seeds in the ground, I might reckon they was right. For some men the grass is always greener. And for others it ain't never green enough." He glanced at Matt, a knowing warmth in

his eyes, his head shaking doubtfully.

Matt said: "It's all the same. Here or there—it's all the same."

"Something keeps a man from ever knowin' that, Lattimore," Kincaid answered him. "It's a good man that finds it out."

"I wish you luck," Matt said tersely.

The wagon train had left the main street and was making its plodding way toward the ford of the river. Kincaid watched it thoughtfully. He said: "You did us a favor, Lattimore. We made a mistake when we asked you for another one."

"It's all the same," Matt said again.

"Sure, son." The old man looked at him for a long time, the friendliness still in his eyes; then he turned his horse suddenly and trotted it down the street toward the disappearing wagon train. Matt watched him go until he lost sight of him in the falling mist.

HE WENT through the town until he found the livery stable, saddled up the mare and turned her out into the street. Already the dampness was beginning to penetrate his bones again, the dampness and the feeling that he'd stayed in one town too long. Kincaid was right—you couldn't keep riding forever, and he realized suddenly that that was what he had been doing all his life. But it was too late now. This was one more town that he had to ride off and leave behind.

He was almost out of town when he saw the low building marked, BARTON'S GRAIN AND FEED. He jerked the mare in short, studied the sign for a minute, then moved over to the hitching rail and dismounted.

Barton was bending over a table, studying some ledgers. He was somewhere past middle-age, with a thin, hard face and narrow, tight-drawn eyes. When he saw Lattimore, he looked up quickly but didn't say anything.

"Mr. Barton," Matt said evenly, "My name's Lattimore. I'm with that train that pulled in yesterday."

"So?" Barton said staring at Matt inquisitively. There was no sign of friendliness on his face.

"We need wheat, Mr. Barton."

"Ten dollars a sack, mister," Barton answered him.

"We need wheat on credit, Mr. Barton," Lattimore snapped impatiently.

"Credit!" Barton said. He laughed and turned back to the papers on the table. "Wheat's ten dollars a sack. In a month, if it don't stop raining, the price will jump to twenty. You'll not get any credit here."

Matt felt the anger take hold of him, but he fought to restrain it. He said, "There's forty people out there that might starve before winter harvest. And if it keeps raining like this, there won't be no winter harvest at all."

Barton straightened up again; there were signs of growing irritation on his face. "Mister, there's a farmer in here every day begging for wheat. And no matter how many come, the answer's always the same."

Lattimore met the man's stare for a moment; then brought the gun out, leveled it at him, and motioned toward the safe.

"This way it's going to cost you more, Mr. Barton," he said calmly. "Three hundred dollars."

The man moved to the safe and began turning the dial. Once he stopped, looked up at Matt and said "You're a fool," but Matt shoved the gun forward at him, and he turned back quickly to the safe. In a minute he had opened the door and reached inside. He covered the opening of the safe and when he turned around quickly, Matt saw the gun. He heard the explosion and felt the shock in his side. He reeled back against the door and slid off to the side. His own gun jumped in his hand, and Barton doubled up, his mouth open and gasping for air. Barton straightened up again and tried to bring his gun up.

He moved across the room, feeling the sharp, tearing pain in his side, and kicked

the gun from the man's hand. Barton moved away from him and sat crouched on the floor, his hands held tightly on his belly. Lattimore went swiftly through the safe, found the money and counted it out. When he turned back, he saw that Barton had rolled on his side, and, in the silence of the tiny office, the heavy labor of his breathing had stopped. He went across the room and moved quickly through the warehouse toward the street. A man came at him from across the store but saw the gun and moved away.

When he reached the street, he saw men moving down from the center of town, and he climbed into the saddle, pulling hard against the pain in his side. A bullet whined over his head, and he thought once of returning the fire. He swung the mare around the corner of the building and pushed through the thick brush till he came to the comparatively easy-going of the pine stands.

The mare ran easily through the thin woods, but two miles out of town, the growth began to thicken again. To his right he could see the greeness of open meadows, but he didn't turn. He had a good start on them, but he would lose his advantage by making tracks in the muddy softness of the meadows. Instead, he slowed the mare to a walk and turned her up the tangled slope toward the hills. He put his hand inside the blanket coat, felt the warmness there, and knew that the wound was still bleeding. And he knew, too, as long as he kept moving, that it might not stop.

Half an hour later he had made the first ridge, but instead of crossing it he cut along its side, afraid to go deeper into the hills lest he lose his sense of direction. Even now, in this new country, he couldn't be sure where he was.

He hit the edge of the woods and rode out onto the floor of the valley without first watching for any movement there. He rode straight across it till he found the road, dismounted and walked back and forth, testing its muddiness. It was soft, too soft for horses; oxen-pulled wagons had gone by there sometime that day. He mounted again, straining at the agony in his side, and turned the mare down the road at a tired gallop.

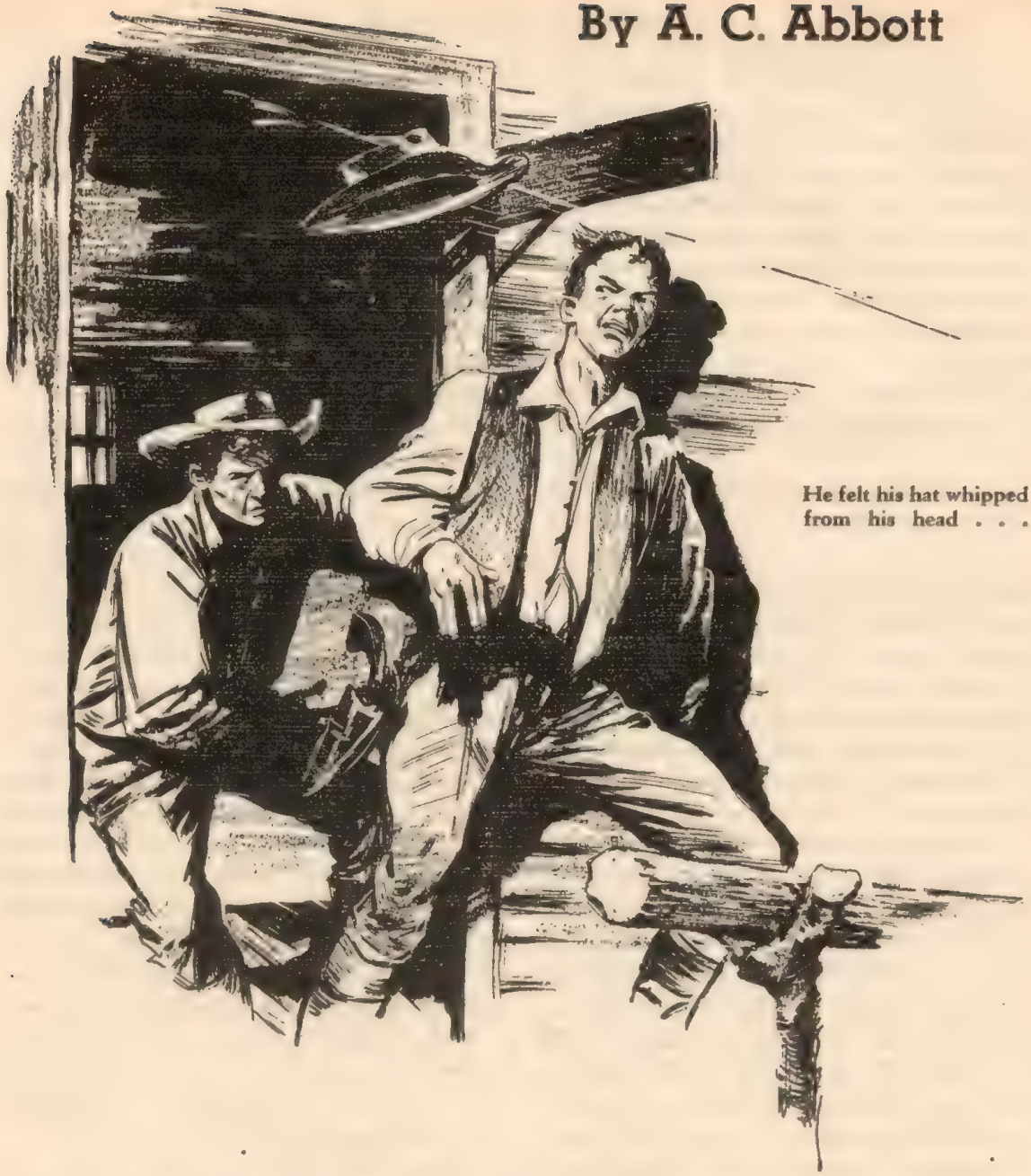
He had gone five miles when the road petered out, and it was another mile before he saw the campfire of the wagon train. He slowed the pony to a walk, suddenly puzzled as to why he had come here. He moved into the circle of wagons toward the light.

They were all there; old Willoughby, Kincaid, young Sam and the rest, and off apart from them, were the women. He saw Beth Kincaid, but he made himself look away.

He watched Willoughby stand up and come toward him. The old man stopped in front of the horse, his eyes searching Lattimore's face. Matt moved his gaze around the circle of the fire, saw the unfriendliness on the faces of the men there, and said, "I've changed my mind, Willoughby." He reached into his coat, found the money bound tightly in the bandana and threw it to the old man. He saw the look of surprise on Willoughby's face, and somewhere near the fire somebody started to speak. It was old Kincaid, but he couldn't hear what he said. Already he had edged the horse out of the light, skirted the circle of wagons and was moving into the darkness. Once clear of the wagons, he kicked the mare into a long run down the valley.

But later he reined her down to a trot. It was still many hours before it would be light enough for the posse to pick up his trail. The mare needed a rest badly, and there was no sense in killing her. When he looked south, down the valley, he could see, even through the rain and darkness, the faint outline of the hills, and he rode toward them. The mare stumbled under him, and there was pain in his side again and a greater wetness than he had felt there before. If he was lucky, he would make it to those hills, he thought. If he wasn't . . . well, there would be other hills. ■ ■ ■

By A. C. Abbott



He felt his hat whipped from his head . . .

HUNGRY—BUT HEROIC

When a pair of broke and hungry drifters like Pecos and Curly get hungry enough, all bets are off. They might even turn out an honest day's work—and wake up as sixgun heroes!

PECOS RYAN leaned his long body against the bar and cocked one gray eye at the florid-faced man behind it. "No jobs around here at all, huh, Charley?"

Charley squinted critically at the glass he was polishing as he shook his head. "Not a chance, boys. Every ranch in the country is full up. Slack season now, you know."

"Yeah, we do know," grunted Curly Davis, Pecos' tow-headed, blue-eyed pardner. "We've rode nine thousand miles lookin' for a job."

"Don't exaggerate, pard," Pecos said quickly. "We wasn't lookin' for a job except on the last thousand of that jaunt."

"You might try over in the Sundown country," suggested Charley, without interest.

"How far?"

"Fifty miles."

"Too far to go on an empty stomach," vetoed Curly promptly.

"Good restaurant right up the street."

"Yeah," Curly said slowly, "but I reckon they charge for their meals, don't they?"

"You guys broke?" Charley asked in surprise. "That why you been drinkin' water? Shucks, I thought you had stomach trouble."

"The only trouble with our stomachs," Pecos drawled dryly, "is that they've done lost contact with food."

At that moment, a strident yell broke out in the street, followed by a fusillade of shots and the wild pounding of hoofs. There were more yells, and then there was a harsh cry which choked off in the middle. The crowd of cowpokes and townsmen in the saloon charged toward the door, Pecos and Curly among them.

The main street of Bowie was dark except for irregular patches of light from the doors and windows. Hoofs thundered, and somewhere out there in the dark, guns flashed and roared.

Pecos reached the edge of the boardwalk in time to see a man throw himself on a horse at the saloon hitchrack and whirl the animal out into the dark. He couldn't see the man's face but caught a glimpse of a wide black hat and overall-clad legs. Instinctively Pecos' hand flashed to his gun; and, holding high, he triggered two quick shots at the departing rider, without results. The sound of two running horses dwindled quickly out of town to the east.

Curly bumped against him, while the crowd spilled off the walk into the dust.

"What did you shoot at?" Curly demanded quickly.

"That fellow." Pecos jerked his head noncommittally toward the dark street, while his hands were busy stuffing two fresh cartridges into his gun.

"That's great!" Curly said sarcastically. Pecos heard his deep-drawn breath. "This place is kinda dangerous, ain't it? Let's get out of here, pard. I've already got one bullet crease along m' neck."

"I've decided to stay," Pecos answered, his voice a little grim.

"Stay! Hell, we can't stay here without no job."

"We can't leave without no locomotion either," Pecos retorted bluntly. "That hombre took my horse!"

Without a word, Curly leaned a shoulder against a porch post and reached for tobacco, while Pecos reholstered his gun and stared at the shadowy street down which his horse had disappeared. Never before in all their wanderings together had they ridden into a country as uncompromising as this. The range was sorely in need of rain; cattle were falling off; ranchers were tightening their belt—and failing to hire cowpokes. Now they couldn't even leave the place.

"Well," Pecos murmured philosophically, "we might as well find out what all the excitement's about."

Matches were flaring up in the street; men were running from all directions; everyone was shouting.

"We got one of 'em!" a voice bawled.

"And a horse," yelled another. "Maybe that hombre is still around."

"No," someone answered. "He grabbed a horse from the saloon rack and dusted out."

From other snatches of conversation, the two cowboys soon learned that the bank had been robbed, but the getaway of the robbers had been rudely interrupted.

Prompted by curiosity, they pushed toward the man who'd been shot, joining the circle around him. It was a young cowman lying flat in the dust, his dark eyes glazed with pain, his shirt rapidly staining red on his right side just above the belt.

"Ben Gordon," someone breathed hoarsely, then added, "I ain't too much surprised, at that."

"Some of you carry him down to the jail and get the doc," ordered Sheriff Scott Bradley in a heavy voice of authority. "Some of you punchers come with me. Maybe we can get those skunks."

"In the dark?" objected Red Pickell, a Five Drag cowboy.

"Well, we can't get 'em sittin' here!" flared the sheriff hotly. "Rustle now."

THE crowd reluctantly dispersed, some of them heading for jail with the wounded man, some running for horses, others investigating the bank, whose vault was empty. They found the banker lying face down in a puddle of blood, the back of his head crushed. He had been forced to open the vault and then had been deliberately clubbed.

Pecos and Curly finally wandered back to the nearly deserted saloon and draped themselves against the bar, rolling thin cigarettes and wondering just what they were going to do next.

"I've got a buck," Pecos drawled ruefully, "but that won't go far toward fillin' three cavities—I'm includin' your horse. After that, we're gonna have to *do* somethin, even if we do it wrong!"

"If somebody hadn't already robbed the bank . . ." Curly mused gloomily.

"Or if it was any horse but Brandy," said Pecos. "I want that roan back."

Charley ambled up and leaned on the bar across from them. Most of his customers were either out chasing shadows on horseback or down at the jail trying to get information from Ben Gordon.

"You fellows drifters, huh?" he asked conversationally, but his eyes were shrewd.

"No, by gosh!" denied Pecos quickly. "We're just lookin' over the country. You show us a job and see how fast we can unsaddle and light."

"Preferably," said Curly dryly, "with our feet under a table."

Pecos, being a stranger, was not particularly interested in the bank robbery, but he was more than slightly interested in the theft of his roan. Since the two crimes merged into one trail, he determined to find out as much as possible about the robbery.

"Who's Ben Gordon?" he asked curiously. "And why would he rob a bank?"

"Well," Charley rubbed his big nose thoughtfully, "Ben's got a little one-horse ranch back here next to the mountain. Got good water on it, but it takes a long time to build up a spread from nothin'. His wife's dead. Reckon he needed the money, all right, even if it hadn't been for Benny."

"Benny?"

"Ben's little boy. Reckon he's six or seven. Broke his ankle last summer, and it wasn't set right or somethin'. It's all crooked, but an operation would fix it up."

"A crippled kid, huh?" Pecos murmured, and found himself feeling a strong sympathy for a man who'd rob a bank to give his boy an operation.

"Yeah," Charley said morosely, "but Ben, he didn't need no fifty thousand dollars for that operation. That'll just about bust the bank, you know, which means it'll bust half the people in the country. Ben's in a hell of a tight hole."

"Reckon he'll tell who was with him?"

"I doubt it." Charley shook his head quickly. "Ben's a tight-mouthed geezer and he ain't afraid of nobody. If he don't want to tell, he won't."

"And they'll hang him," Pecos said softly. "Pard, I reckon there's worse conditions than bein' broke."

A group of townsmen shoved into the saloon, their faces dark and grim, and bel-

lied up to the bar. Pecos recognized several men he'd met earlier in the evening, among them Wells, the owner of the general store. He was a tall, skinny man, gray and humorless.

Charley hastened to take their orders. "Ben wouldn't talk, huh?" he asked.

"Ben lied," Wells said wrathfully. "Claimed he wasn't in on the robbery. Just ridin' into town to get little Benny, who'd been spendin' the day with the sheriff's kid. He saw somebody foolin' around the bank, so he says, and went over to see who it was. These fellows jumped out, and he jumped after 'em, yellin' for 'em to stop. Then somebody blasted him right out of his saddle—by mistake!"

"He'd better start talkin'," threatened the owner of the livery stable grimly, "or he'll decorate a cottonwood tree right quick."

Charley shook his head sadly. "He'll never tell you anythin'. If you boys want your money back, you'll have to hire a detective."

"Won't the sheriff catch 'em?" asked Pecos politely.

Wells favored him with a baleful glance. "Scott Bradley," he said evenly, "couldn't catch pneumonia in a cloudburst."

Pecos Ryan averted his gaze and carefully shaped a cigarette while he considered an idea that might have dangerous possibilities. He and Curly had to have a job, and he wouldn't leave the country without at least trying to recover his horse.

He shot a sidelong glance at Curly, knowing he wouldn't approve of his plan. However, Curly was moodily staring at the backbar; so Pecos cleared his throat and drawled casually, "I worked for the Cattlemen's Association a while back."

"You did? You a detective?"

Pecos shrugged and grinned modestly. "Opinions differ."

"Yeah," Curly agreed bluntly, "they sure do!"

The townsmen looked at each other dubiously and then, by common consent, moved over closer to surround the two cowboys. Wells was the one who spoke. "Your name's Ryan, isn't it? Ryan, this bank robbery is apt to ruin a lot of us. We don't know anything about you, but if you worked for the Association, that's good enough for us. Would you work on this case?"

"What's it worth?" Pecos asked coolly.

Wells hesitated, glancing searchingly at his companions. Apparently he found the backing he needed, for he turned back to Pecos and said evenly, "If you can catch those bandits and return the loot, we'll pay you a thousand dollars. In the meantime, we'll pay all expenses for you and your pard here in town. How about it?"

Pecos hesitated, shifting uncomfortably and cuffing his big hat down over his eyes. He could feel Curly's gaze boring into him, but he ignored it. After several moments of consideration, he tilted his head to peer out from under the wide hat brim. "You sure the sheriff won't get 'em?"

"Dead sure," said Wells bluntly. "He'll run the tail off his horse tonight and then sit down in the office and scratch his head."

"Uh huh. All right, I'll take it."

"Fine," grunted Wells. "Now, I'll buy a drink."

Pecos and Curly downed their drinks rather hurriedly and headed for the restaurant up the street. Pecos was grinning faintly to himself, anticipating a lecture from Curly. However, it did not come until after they were seated and their orders had been given.

"I think," said Curly then, fixing an accusing eye on his tall pardner, "that you're the best single-handed liar that ever came out of Texas."

"I take that as a compliment," Pecos returned, unruffled. "Texas has shore produced some dandies."

"You locoed vinegaroon! You never worked for the Association."

"Yeah, I did—in a way."

"What way?"

"You remember the Rader case?"

"Sure, I remember the Rader case," Curly snorted, "but you never worked on it."

"Well, I sure did," Pecos retorted indignantly. "After that Association fellow got the rustlers all rounded up, I helped him drive the stolen stock out of that canyon."

"Holy mavericks!" Curly subsided temporarily, while a Chinaman placed platters of food before them. Then he started again, his usually cheerful face clouded by gloom. "Damn it, Pecos, you can't get away with it. You're no detective. We're just common punchers, broke punchers at that. S'posin' somebody takes you serious?"

"Somebody already has," Pecos said calmly.

"I mean the robbers you're after. Won't they start throwin' lead?"

"S'matter, Curly? Have you forgot how to duck?"

"Aw!" Curly threw up his hands in thorough disgust. "You're stickin' your neck out a mile and a half."

"Well, I got a job, didn't I?" Pecos flared. "We're eatin', aren't we? Now shut up and let me think, you blockhead. I got me some detectin' to do."

BRIGHT and early next morning, Pecos began his "detectin' " with an examination of the dead horse. The animal, which had been dragged off the street and dumped temporarily into an arroyo behind the bank, proved to be a solid black which was unfamiliar to the people of Bowie. There were no identifying white marks, nor was there a brand of any kind. The saddle was an old, worn out hull that no self-respecting cowpuncher would ride.

"That," observed Curly without enthusiasm, "is a lot of help."

They went next to the stable to see the horse Ben Gordon had ridden. It was a gray, which, according to the hostler, was Gordon's favorite saddle animal. And it had his own BG brand.

"That don't make sense," complained Pecos, as they left the stable and headed for the jail. "If one of those bandits was smart enough to ride a strange horse, why would Gordon straddle his own bronc that everybody knows? A gray, at that. No sir. I may not be a detective, but I can add."

"Yeah?"

"Well, enough to know that two and two don't make five. Let's go see if Gordon looks like a fool."

The sheriff and his posse had returned before daybreak, empty-handed as predicted; but they were not in evidence now. The interior of the shabby office appeared at first sight to be deserted. But it wasn't, quite. Little Benny Gordon slumped in a chair in a far corner, making a pathetic figure. He was slight and skinny, with sun-faded hair and wistful brown eyes. His overalls and shirt, Pecos noticed at once, although faded were unusually clean, which spoke well for a widower with a cow ranch to run. Pecos also noticed that the boy's left foot was encased in a hand-made cow boot, while the right wore an old flat-heeled shoe, loosely tied. A homemade crutch lay on the floor beside the chair.

"Howdy, Benny," Pecos drawled cheerfully. "How's your dad this mornin'?"

"He's pretty sick," the lad responded, eyeing the two strangers without much interest.

"But the doc thinks he'll be all right, huh?"

"Yeah." The boy's chin quivered. "The doc says he'll live to be . . . be . . ."

Benny couldn't finish the sentence, and Pecos swore viciously under his breath. "Take it easy, Benny," he said softly. "Lots of folks talk when they ought to be listenin'."

Benny responded to the sympathy in Pecos' soft voice. He looked up quickly, his brown eyes filling. "They won't hang my dad, will they, mister?"

Pecos squatted on his heels beside the chair and concentrated on shaping a ciga-

rette. Finally he asked, "Do you think he's guilty, Benny?"

"I know he ain't," Benny said, savagely fighting the tears that threatened to convulse him. "I asked him if he did it, and he said no. He said 'Honest to God', and my dad don't say that unless he means it."

Pecos lit his cigarette and dragged on it thoughtfully for several moments before turning his gaze searchingly to Benny's pale face. "You know, Benny, folks are sayin' your dad did it to get money for your operation. Do you reckon that's true?"

Benny shook his head emphatically. "Dad and I talked that over," he stated, and his tone was that of a man instead of a very small boy. "Dad said it'd be a couple years before he had the money, and then we'd do it. My dad don't lie, mister. Folks'll believe that, won't they?"

"I don't know, Benny," Pecos answered slowly. "So many folks are in the habit of lyin' themselves that they just naturally don't believe the other fella. Have you had breakfast?"

"I ain't hungry," Benny answered glumly.

"Here . . ." Pecos pulled out his lone silver dollar and pressed it into the boy's fist. "You go wrap yourself around some ham and eggs. You'll feel better. And don't worry, Benny."

Benny picked his crutch off the floor and got awkwardly to his feet. "Mister," he said wistfully, "I feel better already. You won't let 'em hang my dad, will you?"

Pecos abruptly stood up, his gray eyes hard, his lips grim. Then he dropped a big hand on Benny's thin shoulder and said, "No, by God, I won't! That's a promise, Benny. Now you go eat."

He watched Benny hobble painfully to the door and disappear into the street. He glanced at Curly, who sat on a corner of the desk, swinging his leg and looking at the floor. Pecos took a deep breath and let it out in a curse.

"I agree with you," Curly said promptly. "You sure bit off a mouthful of *somethin'*, cowboy. I hope it don't choke you."

"Let's go," Pecos grunted.

"Thought you were goin' to see Gordon."

"Don't have to. I got the answer to my question."

Pecos' mind was a seething welter of confused thoughts as he stepped to the door and paused to look up the street. Then his thoughts were abruptly scattered.

He felt his hat whipped from his head and heard the thud of a bullet in the wall behind him. At the same time, the flat report of a gun sounded from across the street.

Pecos jumped back out of the doorway and flung himself against the wall, staring wide-eyed at Curly, who had thrown himself to the floor and was already cursing at the splinters.

Pecos grinned, his eyes snapping delightedly. "Somebody," he drawled with dry humor, "thinks I'm a detective."

"Somebody's crazy!" Curly picked himself up, careful to stay out of line with the door. "And they're not a damn bit particular who they kill. Where'd that shot come from?"

"Hotel, I reckon." Pecos recovered his black hat and admired the jagged hole through the crown. "If that's just a warnin'," he murmured whimsically, "the hombre who sent it is sure gettin' emphatic."

"Pard, this ain't funny no more," Curly said urgently. "If they're startin' to take you serious, it's time we pulled out of here and found ourselves some cows to nurse."

"When I leave here," Pecos retorted, in a tone that left no room for argument, "I'll be straddlin' my own horse, and Ben Gordon will be out of jail."

Curly whistled softly. "Now you're takin' yourself serious!"

"Uh huh. At least that answers a couple of my questions. It was a local job, all right, and the fellers that pulled it are back in town now, respectable as hell. So let's take a ride."

"Take a ride?" Curly echoed incredulously.

"Yeah. I got me a hunch, pard. C'mon."

Pecos peered cautiously around the door, then shrugged and stepped into the street. Whoever had fired that shot was undoubtedly back in the saloon now mingling with the crowd and appearing as innocently curious as everybody else.

Curly scratched his head vigorously for a few moments, swearing to himself, but finally stepped out the door and followed Pecos to the livery stable. Pecos rented a horse and charged it to the town of Bowie, while Curly saddled his own bay. Then they jogged out the road to the east.

FOR several hours they traveled erratically, dipping into canyons, climbing ridges, dodging mesquite and thickets in what Curly considered a waste of valuable energy. Pecos, however, following his hunch, was looking for something; and finally he found it. In the bottom of a brushy canyon, feeding hungrily on the grass surrounding a spring, were two horses. Both were saddled and bridled, and both showed evidence of having traveled far and hard. One of them was a big brown animal, unbranded. The other was Pecos' roan, Brandy.

The roan lifted his head and nickered as Pecos called to him. Pecos caught the horse and swore savagely as he examined the animal. Brandy's bit was blood-stained, his neck and shoulders, flecked with foam were now dry. His sides showed long red gashes where spurs had driven into him cruelly.

"And that," said Pecos grimly, "gives me one more reason for findin' the fellows who robbed the bank."

Curly caught the brown horse and led him closer. The animal was gaunt and footsore. "It kinda looks," he murmured, "like that bat-eared sheriff gave those boys quite a chase."

Pecos was circling the area slowly, carefully scrutinizing the ground. Near a big mesquite tree, he stopped and pointed. "Two horses tied here last night for quite awhile. Let's see if we can trail 'em out of here."

Leading the two loose horses, they started out, noticing that the riders had followed the same trail in leaving the canyon that they had used in entering it. With little difficulty they followed the tracks to the point where they turned into the dusty road from Bowie to Sunset, and there the tracks were obliterated by later traffic.

"Prob'ly went on into town," Pecos guessed, shifting in his saddle and reaching for tobacco. "Well, they can't get away, can they?"

"Can't they?" Curly seemed dubious. "Who do you suspect?"

Pecos squinted quizzically at his pard. "Why should I suspect any of these folks, Curly? Hell, I don't even know 'em!"

"Well, you gotta suspect somebody."

"That's true. Detectin' ain't easy, but I'll tell you what I think, pard. You remember that Five Drag puncher we were talkin' to last night before this shindig busted loose? Red Pickell. He rode out with the posse. From what he told us, we know there was at least two sets of punchers that could have pulled the job. The Five Drag boss is gone right now, which means that the other two Five Drag boys were at the ranch alone. Clink Everts and Larry Dillon. They could have done it. Then there's those two punchers from the Rafter J line camp. Wilson and Johnson. They weren't in town, either."

"And all you gotta do," Curly scoffed sarcastically, "is to get 'em to tell which two it was."

"That's all I gotta do," Pecos agreed, refusing to take offense at his pard's scorn. "So far my hunch has worked out right on the nose. If it works from here on, I'm goin' to collect me a thousand dollars, pard. Then I'm goin' to give it to Little Benny Gordon."

"You're gonna . . ." Curly stopped right

there, flabbergasted, said nothing more.

"Sure. If Ben Gordon hadn't busted into that thing and scattered those fellows, they'd have got away on unbranded horses and they never would have been caught. Ben's the one who earned the money, and he needs it worse than we do."

Curly shoved his hat far over his left ear and squinted closely at Pecos. "You feel all right, Pecos?"

"Damn it, Curly, they shot Gordon down and now they're willin' to hang him without givin' him a chance to square himself. It'd be hell . . ." Pecos hesitated, then finished gruffly. "Two years is a heck of a long time for a little kid, you know."

Curly was still squinting at Pecos, but now he grinned slowly. "Pard, I think you're goin' crazy, but I'll help you go. I do hope, though, that you get us a job out of this."

"Sure thing," Pecos drawled with a grin. "One of these outfits around here is goin' to be shy a couple cowpunchers. Which outfit would you rather ride for, Curly? Five Drag or Rafter J?"

It was late afternoon when they again reached town, but they did not ride into it openly. Instead they circled around the business district and dismounted behind the restaurant.

"Everybody's in town," Curly commented, "and don't forget that at least one of 'em's got a gun that likes to point in our direction."

"That's why we came to the restaurant," Pecos returned easily. "This thing's gonna bust wide open pretty soon, and I'd hate to go to hell on an empty stomach."

"The condemned man," Curly said dryly, "até a hearty meal."

Pecos did eat a hearty meal, but he was not as confident as he appeared. His entire plan was based on a hunch, which might blow up in his face at the critical moment. "A hunch and a bluff," he told Curly grimly, "but we'll sure give 'em hell."

After they had finished eating, they led the four horses down to the hitchrack in front of the saloon, walking slowly and warily. Inside, they could hear the angry rumble of many voices, and they could easily guess that Ben Gordon was the man being discussed.

Pecos did not tie Brandy to the rail. Instead, he stood beside him, holding the reins, while Curly went into the saloon to announce their find. He went back instantly, followed by a large crowd. Quickly Pecos picked out the men he wanted to watch. Clink Everts and Larry Dillon, the two Five Drag boys, were ordinary looking range riders, young and reckless. Wilson, of the Rafter J, was a slight, bow-legged rider, gray-haired, while Johnson, the other Rafter J rider, was a big man, heavy through the body, with a surly expression on his deeply-lined face.

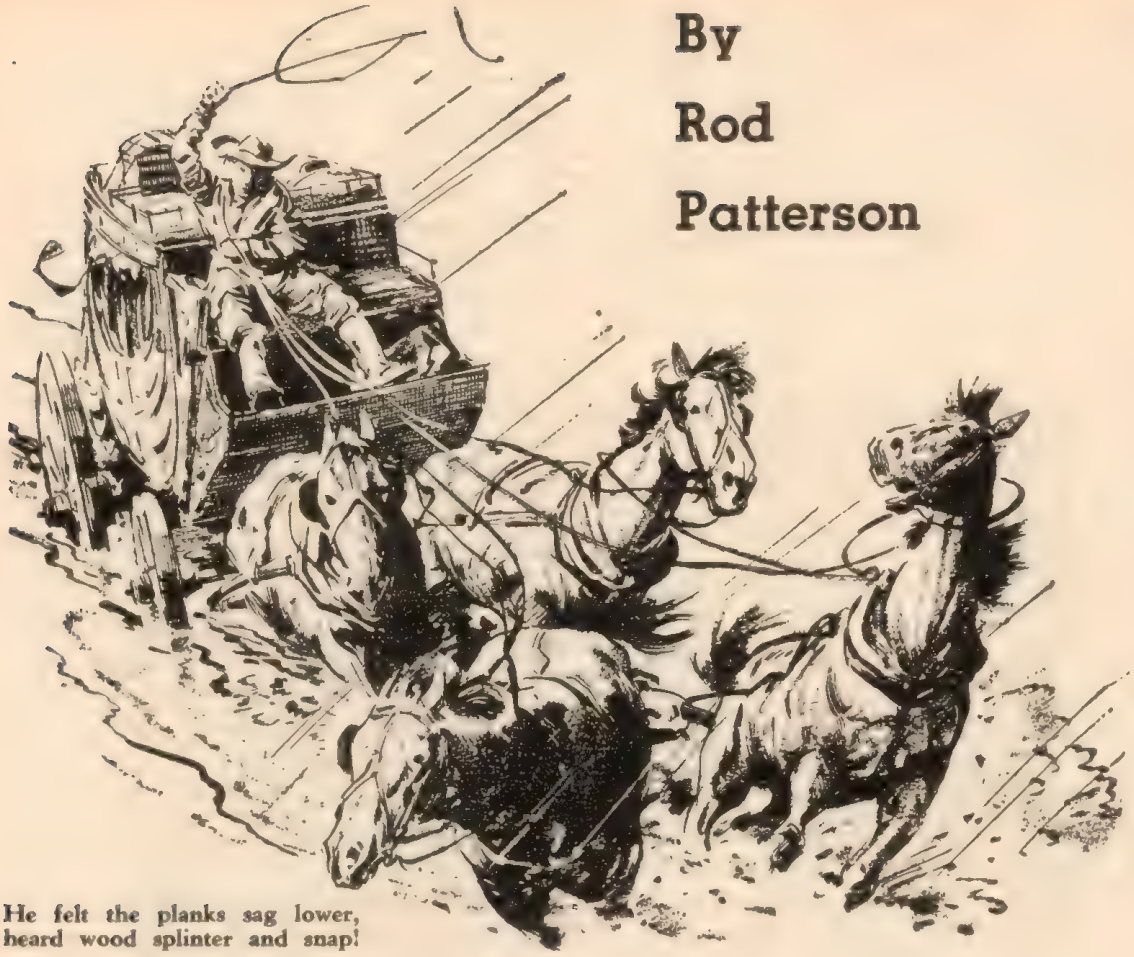
Everyone had something to say about the condition of the horse or the possible importance of his capture. Curly answered questions, while Pecos leaned aginst the hitchrack and smoked a cigarette, covertly studying the men he suspected. Brandy was nervous. Pecos kept his left hand firmly on the reins, his right on the horse's neck as the men circled him curiously.

"Glad you got him back," Charley, the bartender, said, "but it don't help the bank much."

GRADUALLY the men drifted back into the saloon, leaving Pecos and Curly alone. Curly was looking curiously at his long-geared pardner, but Pecos had nothing to say. He looped the reins around the rail, carefully adjusted his gun belt, pulled his hat well forward on his dark head and strode leisurely into the saloon with Curly close behind him.

The saloon was crowded, all the tables filled and the bar lined. Pecos and Curly moved toward the near end of the bar but stopped short of it, all of the crowd before them.

(Continued on page 111)



He felt the planks sag lower, heard wood splinter and snap!

By Rod Patterson

STAGE TO BUCKHORN

Even the best buckskin-popper on the Buckhorn run couldn't, in all his lifetime, earn the damning packet of dinero that Barney was toting for ballast!

THE stagecoach came rocking down the flank of the hills at dusk through the welter of a northeast storm. Trailing tatters of mud and spray, the careening rig rounded the bend into Junction's main drag with a splintering howl of panels and wheels. The four rawboned horses leaned far over at a harness-slapping gallop, the slickered young driver pulling back on the lines. Through the shriek of axles and brakes, his voice went sailing down the canyon of tall store fronts, "Ho, you varmints! Easy, boys!" as he taut-reined his teams to a flourish-finish at the ramp of the stage station.

He dallied the lines to the brake handle and swung down the iron set-back steps to open the canvas-curtained door. "All out!" he chanted in a sarcastic voice. "Change for Butte and Irontown. Hotel's yonder. And don't forget Barney Danvers brought you in without a scratch—the best darn' driver Barnum and Vickeroy ever hired!"

"Yeah?" said a dour little man with

quick eyes and rimrock teeth. "Like to busted all our necks! Swear you wasn't on the trail more'n twice since I got on!"

Barney held the door open, rain sluicing off his hat brim. He was a top driver and didn't mind admitting it. "Safest ride you ever had." He grinned and his eyes flashed blue behind the streaky drip of rain. "I'm tellin' you, friends."

Three other passengers clambered from the damp compartment behind the curtains. One of them, a heavy-set rancher, commented irascibly, "You run the very devil out of them hosses, mister."

"Don't wet-nurse my teams. I work 'em."

As the disgruntled passengers hurried through the mud toward the bright lights of the hotel, Barney hauled baggage out of the rear boot. The stage station came to life. Horses nickered from their stalls in the dim depths of the stable. Voices yelled. A stable hand came splashing up the ramp with his grease bucket and brush. Lanterns made quick arcs against the driving rain.

Pop Cling, the old stable foreman, limped up through the storm, complaining: "You're two hours late, Barney. Ben Dunson's pawin' and snortin' in his office."

"Let him paw," laughed Barney. "Ain't my fault I'm late. There was a hold-up at Buckhorn this afternon. Three hombres held up the bank, killed the cashier and got away with forty thousand dollars in foldin' money."

"What's a hold-up got to do with you losin' headway?" griped the grizzled old man.

"I never argue with the law, Pop. The sheriff closed all the trails while his deputies combed the town. Not a wheel rolled for over an hour. And didn't it rain!"

"Tell it to Dunson."

"Sure will." Barney cuffed the old man gently on the back. He grinned, "Better have the boys put a set of oarlocks on this rig. There's fish swimmin' up the trail this side of Sudro's Ford."

"Ain't I got enough trouble," growled Cling, "without damn' fool drivers makin' punk jokes at me?"

"Ain't kiddin' you, Pop," Barney laughed. "By midnight half the country'll be under a couple feet of water. But it won't bother me none. I got a twelve-hour layover and I'm gonna sleep right through this blow."

He turned and bent his head into the wind and slanting sheets of rain, jogging toward the office at one end of the sprawling log building. But with every stride he took, his feeling of light-heartedness faded. He'd been trying hard not to lose his pleasure at getting the passengers and baggage into Junction without a mishap through the worst storm of the fall, trying, too, to keep one particularly troublesome thought out of his head—the thought of Tory Mullane, the girl he'd be seeing any moment now.

The station waiting room, steamy with heat from the depot stove, was deserted, a pair of chain-hung lamps already lighted and shining dully on the rows of benches. Barney crossed to the pine door whose panel bore the caption: B. DUNSON, SUPERINTENDENT.

With a hand on the door knob, he checked himself a moment, freezing the grin on his face. It wouldn't do to let Tory or Dunson see him without it—not after the quarrel he'd had with Tory. He had to hide his real feeling of glumness from them both, even if it hurt.

THERE were two people in the stage company office when he entered, Tory and the red-haired line boss. He even managed a little of his customary swagger as he greeted them with a quick wave of the hand. What the heck! He was a top driver. If he didn't let people know it, he'd be the loser.

Tory was at her desk, working on waybills and time sheets. Dunson was standing very close to her, leaning on the desk, his broad, high-colored face half smiling, his

hard eyes slightly narrowed and piercing.

Barney directed his gaze to the girl first. She was pretty. She was built. She was sweet. She had lustrous black hair and cheeks the color and texture of rich cream. Her lips were full and red and tempting, her eyes dark and warm. She treated all the drivers with a casual friendliness. If she had a favorite, it was Barney. She always seemed to have a special smile for him.

But Tory wasn't smiling now, as she looked up and saw him standing there with water dripping off his hat. Barney felt a sudden all-gone ache in his chest. But he said, breezy and too loud, "Hi, folks. What a night!"

Just the slightest tinge of a blush touched Tory's cheeks. That was the only response she gave as he sauntered carelessly toward the desk. She lowered her gaze to the papers before her. Barney stopped as though she had slapped him hard. Blood stormed into his face, and he swung his glance to Dunson.

The stocky super was staring at him with open truculence. "Barney, you're late," he said in his gruff, quick voice. "We had to hold the Fort Lyon rig on account of it."

"So what?" Barney's grin left as though the water dripping off his rubber hat had washed it away. "In a blow like this—"

Dunson jerked his head toward the open door of his private office. "In there," he ordered tersely. He was about forty; his face was like something forged and hammered out of metal, and his eyes could cut when they wanted to. "I want to talk to you."

Barney bit down on the hot words that surged up with his temper. He looked down at Tory's averted face, then wheeled and marched into the small office. Dunson followed him and shut the door with a quick slam. Barney took a chair and sat down stiffly, waiting for what was coming.

Dunson went around behind his desk and eased his frame into a swivel chair that squealed when he leaned back. He met Barney's blue eyes. His own told nothing. There were dark stains under his finger nails. He was the line boss but he looked as though he belonged on a high-wheeler with the ribbons knotted in his massive fists.

Barney sat erect, jaw rigid. He blamed Dunson for his quarrel with Tory. He thought that Dunson was trying to cut him out, and right then he'd have given a month's pay for the joy of smacking the big man on the point of his jutting chin. He said with quiet sarcasm: "Reckon I busted up a cozy little talk. Sorry." He had a tight hard swelling in his throat.

Dunson picked up a dead cigar and jammed it between his lips. He ignored Barney's remark. He sighed with mock regret and said: "Maybe it ain't nice to do this, Barney, on a night like this, but I'm short drivers. I got to order you out tonight. Somebody's got to take the southbound to Buckhorn at six o'clock."

Barney sat forward with a jerk, the flame of anger in his narrowed eyes. "Back to Buckhorn!" He laughed harshly. "Listen, Dunson, I just finished a four-hour grind and I need sleep!"

"You can catch up on your sleep tomorrow," Dunson snapped.

Barney exhaled sharply. "Catch hell! Listen, I just brought my rig home in the worst weather in years. Had to fight all the way. Water hub-high at the ford, bridges washin' out. Mister, that's all for the day. I'm tellin' you!"

Dunson's face loosened with a smile that had no humor or sympathy in it. "You'll do it, or I'll fire you and blackball you with every outfit in the country." He spoke softly, but there was the crackle of sparks in his voice.

Barney blurted out savagely, "If you think I give a hoot about this job—"

"That's how I make the line pay," Dunson answered, "doin' the thinkin' for knot-

headed damn' fool drivers. My business is givin' orders and seein' to it that they're obeyed!"

"I got business, too, and it ain't stage business. Not tonight, it ain't!"

Dunson's eyes hardened. His mouth had a whiplash curl to it. "If your business is a damn pretty girl, it can wait."

"So you can work on her behind my back?" choked Barney, balling his hands on his knees. He was white around the lips. "That's why you're stickin' me with an extra run, ain't it?"

"Could be," the super said with a slow tough grin. "And maybe not. Anyway, you're stuck."

Barney was shaking inside. He got off his chair and leaned over the desk, his hands resting upon it. "Why," he demanded, "don't you and me go back to the stable and settle it for good?"

Dunson's voice widened with malice. "Figure you could lick me, huh?"

Barney whispered, "I've always hankered to knock in that vinegar face of yours."

Dunson shook his head slowly, and the smile was gone. "Not durin' business hours, sonny. Tomorrow, when you get back from Buckhorn, I'll let you try."

Barney straightened up, his eyes staying on the super. "I'll remember," he said. He drew a breath. "All right, I'll take your damn' night run and when I get back, I'll take my time!" Then he whipped himself around and walked off.

CHAPTER TWO

The Return Trip

HE STOPPED before Tory at her desk. He was breaking as though it hurt his chest, and his eyes were hot. He whipped off his hat and slapped it against his knee and the drops spattered. His straw-yellow hair stood up every which way, and it gave him a wild look.

Tory didn't meet his eyes for a long moment. She kept riffling through the pile of time sheets, her color high against her cheekbones. He noticed immediately that her hands were shaking a little.

"We were worried about you, Barney," she finally told him in her quiet throaty voice. "In this storm—"

"I bet," he retorted. He licked his lips and tried to think of something scarcastic to say. Then he laughed. "Don't ever worry about Barney Danvers. He c'n take care of himself."

Now, slowly, deliberately, she raised her dark eyes and looked at him. He felt his neck get hot. She said, "Oh, I always forget. You're the best driver Barnum and Vickeroy . . ."

He ducked as from a whizzing missile. "Okay, okay. I had it comin'." His tone turned bitter. "Look, Tory, are we goin' to bust up for good?"

There was a hurt look in her eyes. "Nothing's changed, Barney."

"Don't gimme that," he shot back angrily. "Everything's changed. And I can't figure out why. All I done was ask you to quit the line and marry me." He scowled down at her. "Is it that frozen fish in there?" He ducked his head toward Dunson's door.

"No." She tried to smile, but her mouth trembled, and it faded swiftly. "Don't make me say any more. Please, Barney. It just can't ever be. I can't. . . ."

He saw the glimmer of close-held tears. "You've fallen for Dunson, like I said."

She bit down on her lip. "Barney, please!"

It hurt him suddenly to see her this way. He wanted to tell her how he felt, but his anger and resentment were too strong. It was tough enough—the grind over the hills through high water—without coming back at night to this situation. Heavy hours, dangerous trails, complaining passengers wouldn't be so hard to take if a man had something to look forward to,

something to work for, to come back to.

He rubbed long fingers through his tousled hair, helplessly. "Maybe," he said with heavy irony, "we can still be friends."

"Of course, Barney."

"You think I'd be satisfied with that?" he almost shouted. "You think I'd play the sucker for Dunson?"

She shook her head patiently. "I told you—"

"You've fallen for that big hunk of horsemeat!" he cried.

She rose suddenly behind her desk, her voice angry as she said, "Barney, I won't fight with you."

"Nobody steals my girl!" he shouted. I'm tellin' you!" Then, groaning, "Oh, the heck with it!" he turned and strode from the office.

He heard her quick catch of breath as he slammed the door behind him. Seething with rage, he hit the ramp outside the station. It was five-thirty and nearly dark. He had half an hour before checking in at the station for the run south to Buckhorn.

With his collar pulled high and his hat low, he swung up the street through the swirling curtain of the storm toward his rooming house on a side street nearby.

He had just time enough to pack his few belongings and to pay the week's rent his landlady had coming. He was leaving Junction, leaving the line, leaving Tory. And he didn't care where he went.

Splashing through the downpour, he felt a perverted sense of triumphant pleasure at the thought of disappearing completely, without even a farewell to the girl who had meant more than anything in the world to him. But presently, as he approached the frame house in the streaming darkness, a vast gloom enveloped him.

In his room a moment later, in the silent and seemingly deserted house, he lit the lamp, hauled his battered war bag from under the bed, and hurled articles of clothing and his shaving things into it on the bed. Finally, breathing hard, he sat down and scrawled out a note to his landlady.

Leaving town. Tell anybody that asks for me I won't be back and don't know where I'm heading.

He left the rent money on the bureau, picked up his bag and went back downstairs, after blowing out the lamp, and walked back to the station.

Hostlers had hooked on the fresh teams, and the stage waited at the platform, its big brass side lamps flickering in the gale. Barney climbed to the high seat and stowed his bag in the boot, covering it with a tarp. Then he turned the leather seat cushions over for a drier place to sit. Next he dropped down to the ramp as four passengers, bundled against the storm, hurried out of the waiting room.

MECHANICALLY, he studied them: a woman with a pale wizened face who refused to surrender the carpet bag she carried; a short, chunky man toting a whisky drummer's sample case; an oldish man in a faded blanket coat. The fourth passenger was the dour runty fellow who had gotten on the northbound at Sudro's Ford that afternoon and who had caustically complained about the roughness of the ride.

This man, following the others into the compartment, said to Barney with an effort at affability: "Ain't they got no other drivers but you?"

Barney tried to grin. "Couldn't be in better hands, mister. Safe but fast, that's me."

The man backed out of the coach, changing his mind. "I'll ride topside with you. Give the others more room inside."

"Suit yourself," Barney said absently.

The stranger climbed to the overhanging seat and settled down in the rain. Barney took the lines and whip the hostler handed him and swung up. He gathered up the ribbons, kicked off the brake and cracked the blacksnake over the heads of the leaders. The thoroughbrace coach lurched up

his arm. Even his slicker felt heavier than it had when he had left Junction.

At the corner, where rushing water spilled into a pool, he thought he heard boots thudding over the sidewalk behind him. He didn't look back but strode on, intent on the warmth of a bed and blankets.

He changed the bag to his right hand, then pushed his left hand into the pocket of his slicker. His fingers touched a small package—a package that hadn't been there before.

He stopped, alert suddenly. There was a quick step behind him at the same moment. A voice said, "Hold fast, mister! And hand that bundle over quick!"

Barney didn't move. Something round and hard bored at the small of his back. The pressure increased, and he knew it was the muzzle of a revolver.

The man behind him said curtly, "Lift your arms! Quick!"

Barney obeyed. At the same instant, other boots came pounding along the sidewalk. A new voice ordered: "Put up your hands, the both of you!"

Barney felt the man behind him whirl sharply, and the gun went away as he turned. Barney turned, too, seeing the dim form of a man fade toward a nearby alleyway, seeing other shadows coming toward him through the rainy darkness. Then revolvers crashed under the arcade. Muzzle flame spurted with a volley of deafening reports. The man who had stood behind Barney reached the alley when the bullet hit him. Barney heard the solid tear of lead through bone and flesh, heard the man's cry.

He saw the man sag to his knees in the mud, saw him fall on his face and then roll over on his back, drawing his knees up and then slowly relaxing.

Two men came running up to Barney, and he saw the glint of their revolvers. One of them cried, "We got him, Ed!"

Barney said, "Wait . . . wait!"

He saw the man's arm swing up. He tried to duck the blow of the revolver barrel, but was not quick enohgh. The metal struck him a glancing blow, slashing through his rubber hat. He went down with his skull full of flashing lights and didn't feel his body hit the ground.

He didn't remember very much of any thing after that, except that he was being supported by two men who half-carried him into a place where lamps were bright and voices hummed incessantly.

CHAPTER THREE

Framed

THE pale-glow of dawn coming into the bare-walled office of the Buckhorn jail was rain-filtered and dim, but even so it hurt Barney's eyes where he sat on a bench near the window, his head cupped in elbow-propped hands.

There were two men in the office, and by now he knew them both—Sheriff Payton and his deputy, Deak Olin. The package Barney had discovered in his slicker pocket the night before rested on the sheriff's desk. It had been ripped open and the money counted carefully.

"Forty thousand in new bills," the sheriff had said, "and that's quite a haul. You still stickin' to your story, Danvers?" he asked now, suddenly.

Barney groaned, "I told you the truth, Sheriff. Somebody put that money in my pocket."

Deputy Olin, a chunky man with heavy brows, sneered, "We just got word from your boss. He says you quit last night and your landlady found a note sayin' you was leavin' the country."

Barney nodded, not looking up.

"Looks bad for you, Danvers," the sheriff said grimly.

Barney dropped his hands and sat erect. There was wildness in his bloodshot eyes. "I can't help how it looks!" he blurted out as much in anger as in desperation at the

the street into the slanting sheets of rain and wind.

The night and the storm closed in as the stage rolled out of Junction's outskirts and hit the cambered road leading to Sudro's Ford and Buckhorn twenty miles to the south.

At the relay station on Elk Flats, an hour later, Barney rolled up before the post's oak cabin and corrals and came to a skidding stop. He threw down the reins to old Sam Strachey, who came out with his storm lantern, and dropped from the seat, all legs and torso and rangy arms.

"How's the trail south?" he asked the agent.

"Not good," replied Strachey. "A couple of deputies was through an hour ago, said there's lot of washouts. Ain't you done enough drivin' for one day?"

"My last trip," Barney told him grimly, "and it's a pleasure. Any news about the hold-up men?"

"They cornered 'em over near Salt Creek 'round four o'clock," said the agent. "Shot their hosses and put 'em afoot. They're in the brush somewhere's north of the ford. Better be careful who you pick up tonight."

The passengers crawled stiffly from the coach. The toothy stranger descended from the high seat. The rain came in long-driven gusts off the black rim of the hills. Strachey began unhooking the teams. "Got a fire in the house," he announced, "if you folks would like to dry out."

Three of the passengers moved into the dimly-lighted building, but the quick-eyed stranger remained outside. Something in the man's uneasy manner puzzled Barney, but he couldn't put a finger on it. He kept watching the man where he stood in the lee of the house smoking a cigarette.

The agent unhitched the old horses, ran them into the corral and led out a fresh set. In ten mintues he sang out, "Let 'er go, Danvers."

The passengers returned to the coach, and the toothy man climbed back on the seat. Barney swung up beside him, caught the reins which the agent tossed to him, and kicked off the brake in a single motion, breaking the teams from a standstill.

The coach rattled over the stony yard, leaving a spray of mud behind it. The horses settled at once into a steady run.

It happened about a half-hour later. A few miles north of Sudro's Ford, with the swirling storm slapping at the stage, Barney saw a movement beside the trail. Then, in the glow of the sidelamps, a man appeared. He didn't signal to Barney to stop but, as the coach lurched past him, the man stepped forward a bit, and raised both arms above his head.

It didn't make sense to Barney. A mile or two later, the thin man at his side nudged him lightly and said above the roar of the gale, "What's the next stop, driver?"

"Sudro's Ford. But there's only a house or two, and they'll all be in bed."

The man said, "Don't matter. I'm gettin' off there. Don't feel so good."

Barney gave him a quick look. The stranger's face was indistinct in the streaming darkness, but what Barney could make of him, he didn't look any sicker now than he had back at Junction. Barney said, "All right. I'll drop you at the ford."

The stagecoach swayed on over the washed-out trail. The runty man kept bumping against Barney, holding on with one hand. Suddenly the wraith-like buildings of Sudo's Ford bulged out of the night. Barney reined in the teams and halted the coach in the mud and ruts before a wood-frame house with no lights in or around it. The quick-eyed stranger muttered, "Much obliged," and crawled down off the seat.

Barney said, "Maybe you can wake 'em up," and sent the horses through the settlement toward the crossing a half-mile beyond.

SUDDENLY the trail was sloping downward, and rocks rose on both sides of it. The flooded creek was just ahead, thun-

dering in the darkness. The sidelamps made an eerie glow on the wet boulders as the coach rumbled into a gorge.

Barney took a tight grip on the lines. "Haw, you boys!" he hollered at the teams. "Steady, now!"

The trail dropped shortly toward the ford. Abruptly the horses hit the boiling water. Spray rose around the stage's lurching wheels. "Haw!" He had to yell to get his voice above the roar of the swollen stream.

The leaders plunged into the current. For an instant the coach was balanced nose-down as the wheels dropped into a hole. Then the wheel horses followed, and the rig crazily righted itself with a screeching jerk.

The near front wheel struck a hidden rock, rolled up on it, tipping the coach at a crazy angle that made the passengers yell a protest, and then plunged back down. Barney's arms wrenched straight as the teams lunged up the bank.

The roar of the creek faded behind them, and the horses were in the clear, on the trail again, and trotting as before. For a brief moment Barney felt the old thrill, the old lift of pleasure at bringing his rig and teams out of a tight spot, but almost at once he slid back into his mood of complete dejection.

Within another twenty minutes, they came to a second, larger stream and he halted the coach and climbed down to test the plank bridge. It was a single span, some twenty feet across and ten above the creek. Peering down over the railing, he saw and heard the yellow torrent boiling noisily through its boulder-strewn channel. The bridge planking seemed solid enough to risk the crossing.

Back on the pilot seat, he moved the horses slowly and cautiously, urging them out over the rain-drenched planks toward the grade beyond. He breathed easier when the heavy coach cleared the bridge and the teams settled into the climb for higher, level ground. The grade was slick with greasy clay, an invitation to a skid. On the trail's left edge was a dropoff and the flooded cut through which tumbled the churning creek.

He shouted encouragingly to the horses, ready to pull back on the brake handle if anything went wrong. Nothing did, and soon the stage was rolling on the level.

He felt a twinge of cynical pity for the driver who would have to bring the stage back this way in the morning. He had no intention of being that unfortunate chap, and furthermore he was determined to keep on traveling out of the country, foregoing the pleasure of punching Ben Dunson on the nose. And Tory Mullane? Hell, he'd show her!

At ten o'clock that night Barney brought the stagecoach into the central square at Buckhorn. The big rig was splattered with red Montana mud, the horses caked with it from manes to fetlocks. The lights of stores and saloons glittered through the interminable downpour as he brought the teams to a halt before the stage company office. While the passengers crawled stiffly from the coach, he checked out with the agent, stating bluntly that he was quitting the line and another driver would have to be found to make the return trip to Junction.

When he went back to the street, he got his bag from the boot and started grimly through the rain toward the hotel. He noted a pair of men with gun belts and rifles talking to the old man in the blanket coat. One of the men was scanning papers the passenger had taken from his wallet. Barney saw the armed man nod and hand the papers back; and the oldster, apparently bewildered by something, turned and moved away into the light and shadow under an arcade.

Barney realized that the deputies were watching him, curiously, intently, but he ignored them. Suddenly he was tired, dull-eyed from the strain of the day. He walked on, his war bag a dead weight dragging at

futility of arguing any more with anyone.

Olin said for the tenth time, "You still say the thin man that rode on the seat with you gave you the money?"

"I didn't say he gave it to me," Barney cried. "I only claim he must've put it in my slicker just before he got off the stage at Sudro's Ford."

"Mighty odd thing for a thief to do," said the sheriff. His keen pale eyes held nothing but suspicion. "Three men hold up a bank and then one rides with you to Junction. He buys a ticket back to Buckhorn just to make you a present of the swag. It don't sound reasonable somehow."

Barney winced at the savage sarcasm in the sheriff's voice. "You figure it out," he said, sinking his head in his hands again. "Find out who the man was you killed in the alley last night and—"

"We know his name," said the sheriff. "It was Mullane. Outside of that we don't . . ."

Barney jerked his head erect. A frown marked his forehead. "Mullane?"

"A stranger in these parts," the sheriff went on, still watching Barney suspiciously.

"I'll make a guess about what happened," Barney said, still frowning, still wondering. "The way I figure it, these three *orejanos* held up the bank, gave the money to the thin man with the big teeth to take out of town and then smuggle back again, figurin' the law'd be lookin' somewheres else. When the thin man didn't get off the stage last night, the one you shot followed me to find out what happened to his pardner and spotted me take the money out of my slicker."

The sheriff made an impatient sound and said, "You expect us to take any stock in a mixed up story like that?"

Barney sagged on the bench. His head throbbed where the gun barrel had struck; he was tired; he was sick. "All right, take me back to my cell. I'm through talkin'. I don't care . . . I just don't care any more."

Sheriff Payton threw up his hands. "Let's get him back to Junction," he said to the deputy. "The stage'll be leavin' at nine o'clock."

"It'll be a tough ride," Olin answered grimly. "I hear the bridges're goin' out, and it's still rainin'."

It took Barney, the sheriff and his deputy, only a few minutes to walk to the stage station, four blocks from the jail, but the three of them were drenched when they reached it. Long, thrashing gusts of rain swept the street that was a quagmire of mud from walk to walk.

Barney ducked his head and quickened his step, thinking that the stage, as wet as it must be after standing in the storm all night, would be better than this. The cold cutting edge of metal yanked back on his wrist.

"Take it easy," the sheriff warned. "These bracelets ain't velvet-lined!"

They came to the stagecoach where it stood behind a double team of pullers. The driver was a new man and Barney didn't know him. The deputy went in the stage company office to buy the tickets. When he returned, the sheriff and Barney were seated inside the coach behind the drawn curtains. Olin handed in the tickets and said, "Glad I ain't ridin' in there. Safer topside."

After that Barney didn't think about anything but what faced him when they got to Junction. It was going to be tough to take, meeting Tory and Dunson, handcuffed to an officer.

Two passengers climbed into the compartment—a woman and a scared-looking little girl with damp pigtails. Barney didn't even look at them but sat beside the sheriff, slumped and glum, staring at nothing.

The driver climbed to his seat above them and started the horses. The coach lurched through the town and turned north toward Junction over a road that spewed gallons of water.

BARNEY sat in silence, listening to the creak of stage panels and the whimpering groan of springs, to the steady thudding of hoofs on the trail, watching the rain sweep out of a menacing sky and the trail swimming up out of the storm's murk.

Streamers of fog whipped past the lumbering coach; clouds that were evil and dark raced across the horizon of hills. Cottonwoods and jack willows clung with their roots to disintegrating earth, their limbs tortured by the gale.

Barney felt a momentary twinge of sympathy for the driver and for the patient, steadily trotting teams. Finally they came to the Flat Creek bridge. First there was a hundred feet of slippery grade with little or no foothold for the horses or traction for the wheels, then came twenty feet of planks laid end to end with a low railing of weathered wood. The boiling yellow torrent of a stream gone wild yawning below.

The coach hit the summit of the ridge and started down, toward the bridge. And Barney was staring through a slit in the curtains at the bridge, seeing the swirling current almost up to the level of the planks. It would be a miracle, he thought with a stab of alarm, if the bridge held up under the tons of crashing weight about to strike it.

The driver, up above, was applying the hand brake. Barney heard the metallic rattle of the ratchet as the man hauled back and held the shoes squealing against the wheel rims. Barney's mouth went dry.

Sheriff Payton, leaning forward to peer through the curtains, said imperturbably, "Looks kind of dangerous, don't it?"

Barney leaned closer to the slit in the curtain. "I hope all hands can swim," he grimly declared. "If we get to the bridge, we'll have to cross it. No place to turn around."

The woman passenger screamed softly, her hands suddenly pressed to her mouth, and the little girl began to cry softly, her eyes shut tight. The coach had topped the slope, the wheels locked and sliding in the greasy mud, the teams fighting to hold the ridge's summit and was halfway down the rig. The driver was yelling suddenly in a choked voice.

The stage reached the bottom of the grade and lurched to a stop, the leaders only inches from the first plank of the vibrating bridge. They were standing on a kind of causeway, an approach filled in by road workers between the grade and the bridge abutment. As Barney turned on the seat cushions and peered through the curtains to the rear, toward the grade, he saw a crack split open across the road, ten yards behind the coach. As he stared the crack widened and then became a great gaping slot as the flooded creek undermined the road in a dozen places.

He drew a swift breath, saying sharply: "We're trapped. Can't get back even if we c'd turn around. We'll have to chance crossin' the bridge or go down when the road caves in!"

Agitation showed on the sheriff's lined face for the first time. The woman and the child were silent now, wide-eyed with terror.

The sheriff looked at Barney. "You been over this bridge a hundred times in bad weather. You want to take us over now?"

Barney was quiet a moment, hearing the driver's body sliding down off the seat overhead. If he agreed to drive the spooky horses across that shaking stretch of beams and planks, it might mean death for them all, death by drowning in that terrifying torrent that climbed higher as the seconds passed.

On the other hand, if he could persuade the sheriff to unlock the handcuffs, he'd have as good a chance as the others. Why should he make any attempt to save these people, to save the sheriff?

The sheriff said, impatiently: "What d'you say, Danvers?"

Barney didn't reply. He only raised the wrist that was manacled to Payton's. The

sheriff quickly produced the key. The handcuffs snapped open. Just then the stage driver opened the coach door and poked a white, drawn face inside. "We're in for it," he announced in a shaken voice. "That bridge is goin' to go any minute! We gotta do something!"

The sheriff pushed the frightened man aside. "Danvers can take us across."

Barney crawled out of the rig, swinging down from the iron step and turning. The gale was a solid weight that pushed him against the coach's panels.

Horses and coach were slewed at an angle across the road, the off hind wheel barely edging the drop-off. They were ten yards short of the bridge, and the stage, tilted to one side, was dipping lower as the flood tore at the road's shoulder.

Barney hesitated, staring at the boiling stream and, as he sized the situation up, he saw the yellow water begin oozing up through the bridge's planking. Time was running out.

He yelled at the driver, "Get in. We'll try it," and swung up to the seat, gathering up lines and whip, kicking off the brake. He shouted to the teams, "Hee-yah, boys!" and sent them lunging hard into the traces.

The coach hit the bridge that already was beginning to sag. He took the low side deliberately, knowing it would give under the weight of horses and rig and passengers, but wanting room to swing. He felt the planks sag lower, heard wood splinter and snap. He laid the long whip on the leaders' pitching backs.

"Yah!" he yelled.

The bank loomed up. He pulled hard on the ribbons, expertly rolling horses and coach, trying to hold the sinking bridge steady with the massed weight of a forward rush. He felt the wheels skid, felt the deck tilt steeply to the left. The horses fought for their footing on the slippery planks. Then, impossibly, they were clear of the bridge.

HE PULLED in, drawing the reins against his chest, easing coach and teams to a halt on solid ground. He realized that he was shaking from head to foot. He looked back. The bridge had vanished. There were only the splintered butts of timbers sticking up grotesquely out of the boiling flood.

He wrapped the lines around the brake handle and climbed down the side of the rig. Halfway to the ground, he turned his head at a sound. He saw two men below

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him, waiting. His breath went out sharply. He recognized the thin, toothy man who had planted the stolen money in his slicker pocket the night before; and he identified the other as the one who had waved his arms at the stage near Sundro's Ford.

Barney saw the glitter of a gun. He twisted abruptly, hurled his body out and downward, his muscles projecting him clear of the coach. The thin man had no time to aim. The revolver sent a bright needle of flame almost in Barney's contorted face.

Voices yelled. Another gun made a dull report. Barney struggled to rise. His boots slipped in the mud, and he fell prone. He felt a strange sense of weariness and peace. After that he knew nothing.

When he regained consciousness, he found himself lying on his back in the mud, the stagecoach looming above him. Faces stared down at him. One of them was Tory Mullane's. It was Tory's lap his head was cradled in, and Tory didn't seem to mind the mud.

He didn't want to move. He felt her soft hands press his temples. He squinted upward through the rain. Tory's face was streaked with mud and tears, and she sat very still, her mouth trembling as she tried to smile.

"Nice meetin' you," he grinned.

"Ben Dunson brought me in his buckboard," she said, gently, tremulously. "We heard the sheriff had arrested you. They told me my brother . . ." She couldn't finish.

He stared up into her eyes. "Your brother?"

She nodded miserably. "He . . . was one of the men that held up the bank. He . . . he's been in prison. Oh, Barney, that's why I couldn't—"

He stopped her with a hand lifted to her lips. "You crazy kid," he said in a husky voice.

A voice—Ben Dunson's—spoke suddenly above them. "She told me about her brother a month ago, when Mullane got out of the pen. Tory made me swear I wouldn't tell you."

Barney looked at Tory. He tried to rise, but she held him firmly. "Not until we make sure how bad you're hurt," she said.

"Look," he said, "I got a date with that big hunk of horsemeat. I got to keep it and take my medicine."

"Shut up!" barked Dunson. "I wouldn't stand a chance with a man that brought this rig through the mess you did!" The smile spread to his eyes. "Okay with you?"

"Okay with me," grinned Barney.

Sheriff Payton's face appeared next to Dunston's. He too, was smiling, "You had it doped out pretty good," he said. "There was three of 'em in that hold-up. Your thin friend just spilled it all. It was Mullane that killed the cashier and then holed up in town. The thin man bought a ticket to Junction and took the swag with him, and later the third man left town with two horses, figurin' to throw us off their trail. Trouble was, my boys shot the horses in the brush and put that feller afoot, upsetting their plans. The thin man started back to Buckthorn with the money. His pard wavin' to him from the trail scared him, and he planted the package of bills in your slicker, knowin' Mullane would follow you when you got to Buckhorn. They had it planned. If anything went wrong, he'd give the driver of the stage a package to deliver to Mullane. There wasn't no time to explain so the thin man just shoved the money in your pocket."

Barney sighed, "And that puts me in the clear?"

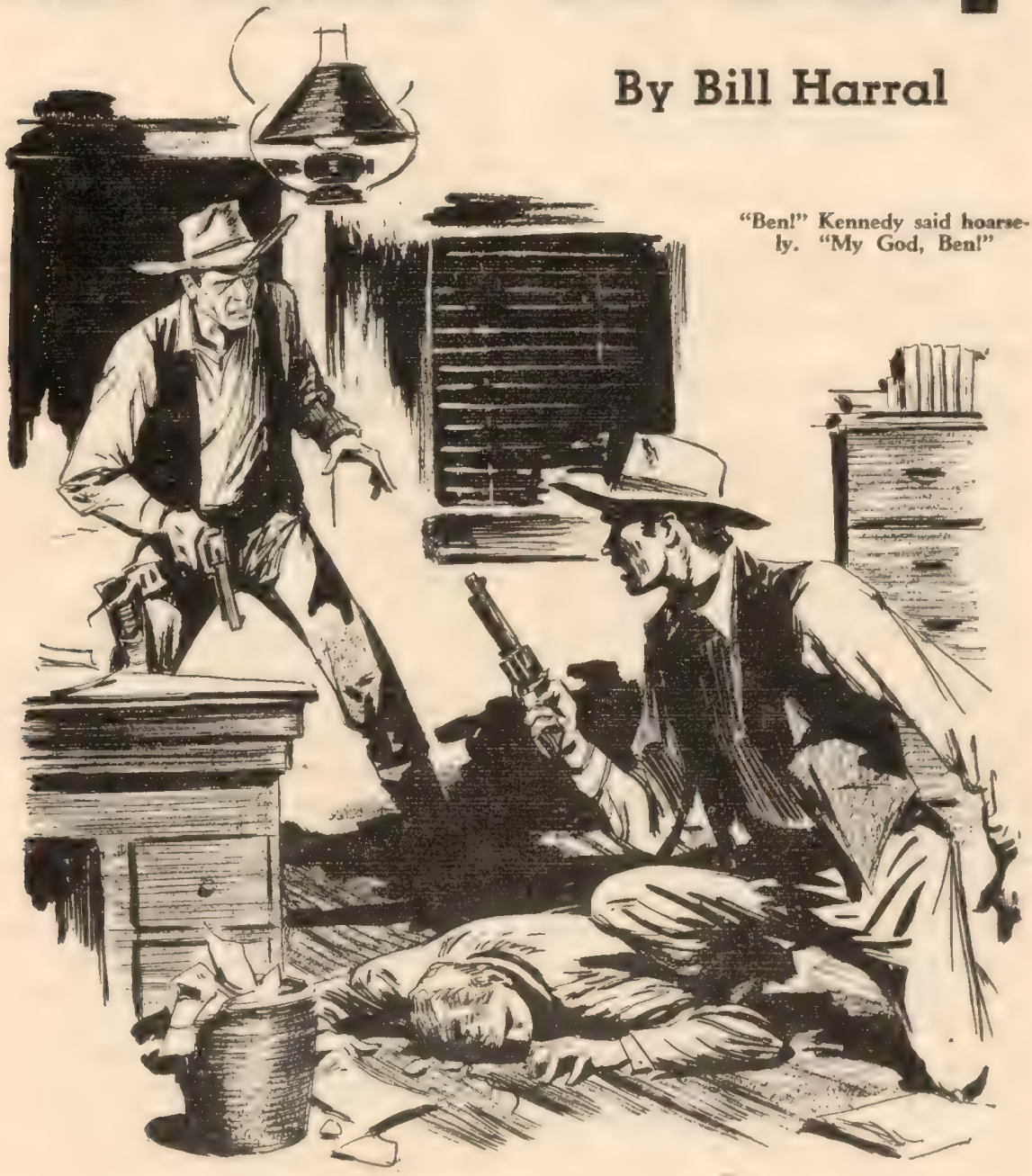
"Kind of," the sheriff agreed. "But don't leave the country till the case comes up."

Barney moved his head in Tory's lap, contentedly. She took his hand and turned hers so that her fingers were small, soft patterns of his own.

"Leave the country?" Barney said in a scoffing voice. "Ain't *never* gonna leave. I'm tellin' you!" ■ ■ ■

In Line of Duty

By Bill Harral



"Ben!" Kennedy said hoarsely. "My God, Ben!"

When your girl's brother is the killer you must bring in to hang . . . That's the time when your lawman's badge seems as cold as your heart should be, and somehow your gun's too heavy to pull!

SHERIFF Bill Kennedy took his time getting to Carlton Bailey's bank. The banker had sounded urgent, but it was hard to believe there was any real trouble here in Concho.

Yet there was a tenseness in the air too, as though this conglomeration of human noises was merely the calm before the

storm he couldn't believe was coming.

A man staggered toward him down the boardwalk. He grinned. Doc Holmes was a good sawbones, but he couldn't stay away from the bottle, and, with people able to go to the new doctor, it was hurting his business.

"Hello Doc," he said softly, "how's tricks?"

"Ain't seen 'er since I left Texas," the Doc muttered owlishly. "Wanna drink?" He pulled a flask from his pocket and thrust it out.

"No thanks, Doc. You better go home and sleep it off."

"Sawright," Doc shrugged. "Drink by m'self." He took a long drag, wiped his thick lips with the back of his hand. "Ah," he sighed.

Kennedy watched the Doc stagger away. "Seems like the whole town's going to pot all at once," he mused. He had been irritable lately.

Realizing he was being unreasonable, he frowned. If he could get Ben Price to okay his marriage to the young rancher's sister, Ruth, everything would be all right. That would be pretty hard to do, he mused, since Ben had said that he didn't want his sister to marry a lawman.

"You're nothing," Ben had once said, "but a glorified gunman, Kennedy. My sister wouldn't be happy with you!"

All the arguments Kennedy'd put up had no effect upon him. He was a stubborn young man, and Kennedy had begun to wonder that would happen if he married Ruth anyway. Probably nothing, he thought. Just like this feeling he had about tonight.

Nothing had happened in a long time and nothing would tonight. Doc Holmes had been around since he could remember. He'd be around long after the new sawbones, Doc Overby, was long gone. Still Bailey's visit earlier that afternoon had disturbed him, and yet he couldn't find any reason for the fear he had sensed in the little banker.

Carlton F. Bailey had come nervously into the law office that afternoon, his black broadcloth coat, silk white shirt and string tie were neat and spotless as ever. His sharp little face seemed a little sharper than usual as he adjusted his pinz-nez and squinted at Kennedy.

"Alone?" he'd asked, fingering his glasses nervously.

"Something in your dark past you'd like to confess?" Kennedy had joked with a grin. "Or is the dry weather makin' it hard to collect on loans?" He turned sober. "Me and Lund was out to Ben Price's place this morning. He's hard hit."

Bailey's thin lips tightened, and his heavy brows drew together in an annoyed frown. He seemed about to speak when the door opened and Kennedy's deputy, Carl Lund, stomped in.

Leaning forward, Bailey had whispered, "Come see me at the bank after dark, sheriff. Got some things to talk over." Then he'd nodded curtly to Lund and hurried out. Lund pushed his hat back on his curly head and scratched his head.

"What got into him?"

Staring after the banker, Kennedy grunted. "Don't know," he muttered. He wondered if Bailey was afraid of Lund.

Now the deputy rode past on his new horse, a bay, with new bridle, saddle and all. Darkly handsome, the deputy cut a fine figure in his new finery; but Kennedy couldn't help wondering where the money had come from. Deciding that Lund had probably saved it from his previous job, whatever it had been, Kennedy came to the blacksmith shop and paused in the shadows as a coyote howl came to him from the hills. It was a far away, mournful sound.

Moving forward again, Kennedy turned a corner. He could see, half a block ahead, a yellow lamp gleaming feebly in Bailey's bank window. Then he heard the scream.

It was a shrill, high-pitched scream of fear that sent shivers through him. The scream was drowned in the roar of a gun.

KENNEDY realized that he was moving, running toward the bank, his boots drumming hard on the board planking. Reaching the door, he slammed through it. Inside, shock knifed through him as he saw a familiar figure, bent over the body of the little banker, with a gun in his hand. The man stiffened and whirled.

"Ben!" Kennedy said hoarsely. "My god, Ben!" Then his addled brain grasped the situation and he added, "Drop it!"

The gun tumbled from stiff fingers, thudding on the pine floor. Ben's face was white.

"I . . . I . . ." he stammered, then gasped, "the killer's getting away, Kennedy. Stop him!"

Kennedy hesitated, then cocked his head, listening. Footsteps sounded outside, and he moved toward the back door. Then he heard the sounds clearer. Someone was coming. He turned his gaze to the crumpled heap on the floor. Carlton F. Bailey would never feel fear again. He was dead, dead as a man could be.

"Don't lie to me, Ben," Kennedy said hoarsely. "Why'd you do it?"

Hurt shone in Ben's eyes. "I . . . I . . ."

"And Ruth, Ben . . . This'll kill her!"

Helplessly, Ben gestured. "I didn't kill him."

Kennedy hesitated. Ben was Ruth's brother. Like his sister, he had strong, rugged looks. He could rope and bulldog and brand doggies all day long and then go out that night and dance till morning without any signs of fatigue. He was twenty-five, still reckless, devil may care. But he had a steadiness about him and he'd never gotten into trouble before. Kennedy found himself wondering what effect this evening would have on his marrying Ben's sister. Probably plenty.

He sighed. He couldn't think of that. The evidence was here before him. He had no choice. The knowledge left him feeling sick.

"Sorry, Ben," he said wearily. "I'll have to lock you up, at least until I get to the bottom of this."

"I came to see Bailey about my loan, Bill. Not to kill him. You let the killer get away while you stood there holdin' a gun on me!"

Kennedy shook his head. "Don't lie, Ben."

"Hell! I'm not lyin'! If you had any sense, you would see that, man! This proves what I always said, Bill. You're nothin' but a glorified gunman!"

Kennedy opened his mouth to shout something back. Then he heard sounds at the door and turned his head far enough to see Carl Lund coming in. "See what you can find out back, Lund," he said instead.

The deputy nodded, crossed to the rear door and stepped out. He was back in a moment. "Not a soul out there," he said laconically, his black eyes watching Ben.

"No," Ben said bitterly. "Kennedy let him get away."

Grunting, Kennedy scooped up Ben's gun, sniffed it. The acrid stench of burnt powder stung his nostrils, and he knew before he looked there would be at least one empty chamber. There was.

"When'd you shoot this gun last, Ben?"

"Why I . . . I shot at a rabbit on the way in."

"Nobody'll believe that. A jury'd say you made it up."

"Do you believe it?"

Bill didn't have time to answer because the townsfolk were crowding in the door then, and he had to send Lund to keep them back. Lund pushed his way outside, and they heard him telling the crowd what had happened. "You can all go home," he said loudly. "Ben Price killed Bailey. Me'n Kennedy caught him red-handed."

"Why that dirty . . ." Ben headed for the door, but Kennedy cut him off.

"Sit down and keep your shirt on, Ben. You're in deep enough as it is."

Ben glared. He wasn't going to forget Lund's words for a long time.

"How'd it happen, Ben?"

The big cowman wiped his face with a red bandana. There wasn't any sweat there, but he wiped it anyway. "I . . . Doc Holmes was out making calls this afternoon. He said Bailey wanted to see me about my loan, so I saddled up and come in. I was reachin' for the door when I heard Bailey yellin'. I ran in, but whoever it was got away out the back door. I was lookin' to see if anything could be done for Bailey when you came in with your gun drawn on me."

Lund came out of the sea of faces, dragging a paunchy, red-faced man behind him. Odd, Kennedy thought, how much alike they looked. But perhaps it was merely a trick of the lamplight.

"Here's the Doc," Lund said.

Distastefully, Kennedy raised his eyebrows. "Sober, Doc?"

"Had to leave a cup of steaming coffee," Doc Holmes grumbled. "What's the trouble?"

Kennedy led him inside. "Over there behind the desk. Take a look, Doc—not that it'll do any good."

"I wish," Doc Holmes grumbled, "people would try dying at my convenience sometime, not when I'm sleepin' off a jag."

"Hell," Ben Price said coldly, "you ain't had any business since Doc Overby came to town. You oughta be glad you got this county call."

Holmes turned red but he said nothing, and Kennedy didn't feel like grinning. "Better take Ben down and lock him up," Kennedy said, and Lund nodded and motioned to Ben.

"Come on," he growled. "Time for you to start gettin' used to them bars down at the jailhouse. You'll have a long time to think about what you done."

Ben glared, and Kennedy thought he was going to smash the deputy with his clenched fist, but he seemed to get control of himself. Then he spun around and walked stiffly, proudly down through the crowd and into the street. Lund was close on his heels, stopping only long enough to snare the reins of his new horse.

HE WATCHED them go with mixed feelings. There was a sadness in him, for he knew what this news would do to Ruth. He knew she'd stick by Ben. He picked a key off the banker's desk, absently clinching and unclinching his fist around it, and sat on the desk.

Being the one to arrest Ben had hurt. It looked an open-and-shut case against him. Still he had known Ben for years, and it was hard to believe Ben would kill a man in cold blood. Somehow he'd always figured Ben would give the other fellow a fair break. But what was he to believe? A scream and a shot, and he *had* found Ben standing over the dead man with a gun in his hand—a gun which had been fired recently. Ben's story was too neat—the kind of thing a man grasping for straws might think of. And yet there might be truth in it. Ben might not be lying. He sighed and turned to watch as the flabby sawbones finished his examination.

Ponderously, Holmes got to his feet. He removed his glasses deliberately and looked at Kennedy silently.

"Well?" Kennedy growled.

"I'd never have believed it of Ben," he said, clucking his tongue. "Such a nice young fellow, too."

"Take care of your sick and your dead and leave deciding the legal part to me!" Kennedy snapped. "What'd you find?"

Doc Holmes closed his little black bag with an angry click. "He's dead. Shot in the back. Bullet lodged against a bone. Nice and clean and high-powered I'd say."

"High powered?"

"Yeah. A rifle." Doc Holmes slapped on his beaten old hat. Kennedy ignored him, searching the room. Then he saw the rifle standing against the rear door sill. He looked at it a long time before he picked it up.

A sniff of the barrel told him that it had been fired recently, and when he jacked the chamber open, he found an empty shell. It was an old .44-40 with bolt action, and the bolt was shiny from use. A spark of hope leaped in Kennedy. Maybe this would prove Ben was telling the truth. He hardly dared hope as he started for the door.

They went out together, Kennedy pulling the door shut, locking it, handing the key to the sawbones.

"I'll get a wagon and come back for the body," Holmes grunted.

Kennedy nodded absently and walked away. Carl Lund stood up as Kennedy entered his office, his eyes bright as he looked at the rifle Kennedy held cradled in his arms.

"What you got there?"

"Rifle," Kennedy said laconically. "Know who's it is?"

Lund shook his head, and Kennedy grunted and went down the corridor to Ben's cell.

"What does our two-bit sheriff want now?" Ben sneered.

Ignoring the sarcasm, Kennedy held out the rifle. "Ever see this before?"

Ben stared at the weapon, then got up and came and squinted through the bars. "Well, I'll be damned!" he breathed. "So that's where it went! I tried to find that thing right after you and Lund was out to our place this afternoon. Wanted to go after a coyote. You stole it and killed Bailey with it and now you're goin' to use it against me!"

"I found it in Bailey's office," Kennedy said through tight lips. "I hoped it would help you."

"You knew it wouldn't," Ben growled angrily. "You saw to that. I told Ruth you was no good. Now I know it! If I ever get out of here, I'll see to it that you never arrest another innocent man, Kennedy. So help me!"

"Shut up!" Kennedy barked. "Maybe it'll do you good to cool your heels a while —guilty or not!" He turned on his heel and stalked out, anger burning hot in his cheeks. Coming into his main office, he was just in time to see the door burst inward under a small, but very pretty, tornado.

"Bill!" Ruth Price stormed, "what's this about Ben killing Bailey?"

"Whoa, gal!" Kennedy pleaded as he backed away before her furious advance. "No need to go gettin' all riled up."

"Riled am I?" she stormed. "You bet I'm riled! You know Ben wouldn't kill anybody. Why did you lock him up?"

"I . . ."

"Give me the key. I'll set this thing right. Ben didn't kill anybody, no matter what they say."

Carl Lund came up out of the chair behind Kennedy's desk. He'd been sitting there a lot lately. Maybe he was thinking of running for sheriff in the next election. . . .

"Now Miss Price," he soothed, "we got our duty to—"

"Your duty!" Ruth cried bitterly. She swung her hand, and it made a sharp splatting sound on his face. Somehow it made Kennedy feel almost like grinning. It was something he'd felt like doing himself for a long time now. But he didn't grin, for Lund reached out, and his open palm caught Ruth across the face, sending her spinning to the floor in a blur of skirts and lacey petticoats.

Kennedy felt something snap inside him. He shot out a hand, grabbing a fistful of Lund's shirt, pulling him in. He shot out his right fist. The shock of the blow ran up his arm. Lund's head snapped back, and the deputy went limp.

Kennedy let him slide to the floor and stooped to help Ruth. But Ruth, her face pale with anger, ignored his outstretched hand and, slipping past him, ran toward the cells.

Reluctantly, Kennedy let her go. Lund was stirring and he reached down and

impatiently yanked the man to his feet.

"Get out!" he said and shoved the man away from him. Lund stumbled backward, brought up against the back wall. His eyes flamed, his hand dropped toward his holstered gun. Kennedy crouched.

"Try it," he invited coldly. "Go on, try it!" For a minute he thought Lund would draw. The deputy's hand caressed his gun. Then he hesitated and stooped to pick up his hat. Kennedy relaxed. The moment of danger had passed.

Wordlessly, Carl Lund stomped out. He didn't meet Kennedy's eyes as he passed or look back as he went out, but Kennedy knew he hadn't seen the end of him. Maybe he should fire Lund. He didn't want a man around he didn't like. But if he let Lund go, he could be accused of letting a girl come between him and his duty.

He sighed. One thing he could be sure of, he thought bitterly, was that Ruth wouldn't be in any hurry to marry him now. He heard Ruth's and Ben's angry voice. After a while she came out, and Kennedy leaped to his feet.

"Ruth!"

Without a glance in his direction, she flounced out, and he sank morosely down behind his desk again.

A hell of a mess, he thought wearily, and kicked the battered old desk. Staring through the open doorway into the street, he listened to the cowboys' raucous laughter, as they rode through the darkness outside, and wondered how they could be so damned happy.

HE THOUGHT about Bailey's killing, going over it again. Something about those footsteps he'd heard, just after he'd stepped inside, worried him. It could have been what Ben had said it was—the killer getting away. It had seemed at first that the sound was receding. But when he'd concentrated on the sound, those footsteps had been definitely growing louder. Maybe the killer had run outside and then doubled back. Lund had gotten there first. It could have been him. It could have been any of a hundred people. It was odd, though, that Lund was the first there.

Grunting, Kennedy muttered out loud, "Hell, I'm sure losin' my grip. Suspicious of my own shadow. Carl may not like me after what happened today, but I can't say as I blame him. Suspectin' my own deputy. A pretty mess!"

Still, he couldn't help wondering. What, after all, did he really know about Carl Lund? The man had ridden into town one day, said he was from Texas and wanted work, and, not being able to find anyone else to take the deputy's job, Kennedy had given it to him. And that, he had to admit, was all he knew about Carl Lund. Where the money for the new horse and clothes had come from, he had no idea. What was in the man's past was anyone's guess.

He wondered now why he hadn't tried to find out more about the man he'd hired as his deputy. Then he realized it would probably have been useless. Carl Lund was the only man who could tell what his past had been and if there were something dark and ugly in it, he would never tell.

Sighing, Kennedy got up and walked outside. Maybe if he went up to Bailey's office and looked it over again, he might find something he'd missed. But first he wanted to talk to Doc Holmes.

Completely sober now, Doc Holmes lit his old Dutch pipe and puffed thoughtfully. He dug in his pocket.

"You came after Bailey's keys?"

Kennedy nodded, took the keys and rammed his hands deep into his pockets, pacing the floor wordlessly. Doc Holmes stirring, puffed smoke at the ceiling, his eyes watching narrowly. Finally, he reached in his desk, searched a moment then handed a lead slug to Kennedy. Kennedy held it in the palm of his hand.

"So," he said softly, "it was the rifle."

"Sure," Holmes grunted.

"Hell, Doc, it don't make sense."

"What don't?"

"The rifle. It had been fired lately. So had Ben's hand gun."

"He said he'd shot at a rabbit, didn't he?"

"He said that. He must have. But if he told the truth about that, he might've told the truth about everything else."

"That what's bothering you?"

Kennedy shrugged. "Maybe."

Leaning forward, Doc Holmes pointed with his pipe stem. "I never was," he said deliberately, "a man to talk much when I was sober. But I'm sober now and I want to talk. You're barking up the wrong tree if you think Ben Price did it. He's not the type, and this rifle business bears it out."

Kennedy shook his head. "Wish you were right, Doc. But it was Ben's rifle. He could have shot a rabbit with his sixgun, then used the rifle on Bailey later. That would account for both guns being fired."

"Hmmm." Doc studied the ceiling. "Maybe you're right. But why?"

"Maybe Bailey was going to foreclose on a loan he'd made Ben. Things are pretty tough around here now, Doc. The grass is dryin' up, and cows are gettin' thin. With the drought on, a lot of cowmen are in trouble, and maybe a lot of them had loans from Bailey. Maybe there was others he was going to foreclose on. Maybe I can find out at the bank."

"That gives Ben a good motive all right," Holmes growled, squinting at Kennedy, "But if you're so sure, why do you keep poking around?"

Kennedy sighed. "I don't know. Hoping I'm wrong, maybe."

"If you ask me," Holmes growled, "I think you ought to have your head examined. If Ben's guilty, why he's guilty!"

"I didn't ask for professional advice, Doc!"

"Then what do you want?"

"Bailey's keys," Kennedy said curtly and left. He couldn't help banging the door a little harder than usual as he went out. Bailey's office was much the way he'd left it except the body was gone, and only the tell-tale stain on the floor revealed that a man had died here today.

He didn't know what he was looking for. It looked an open-and-shut case against Ben. But he was filled with doubts, intangible things which rose up in his mind to confuse him. Maybe Ben's being Ruth's brother had something to do with it. Well, maybe it had. . . . So what?

METHODICALLY, he went through the banker's papers, tackling the desk first. There were blank notes and filled in notes. Everything was neat and in its place —the same as the way Bailey had dressed. Yet, as he went through the desk, something nagged at his conciousness. Something was wrong. Something he couldn't quite grasp. Then he understood it.

Here was a note or a letter unfiled, here a bottle of ink tipped in its well, here a ruffled look to the papers. He wasn't sure until he came across a sheaf of notes, flung hastily into the filing cabinet. Excitement pulsed through him.

All of the notes had names on them which began with "P". But Ben's note was not there. And Kennedy became convinced, as he continued through the filing cabinet, that others were also missing. Why? Why would Ben want any note but his own, assuming he had killed Bailey? Had he picked the others up because he was in a hurry?

Then he realized Ben hadn't had time when the killing had been discovered and he couldn't have come here later and made a search because he was in jail! But if not Ben, who?

Sighing, Kennedy scratched his chin. "If Ben didn't, who did?" he muttered to himself. Who could have come back later and searched the banker's office? There was only one key, and he had that in his pocket. Yet somebody had been here, and the lock on the door hadn't been tampered with. Kennedy stood up.

He stood up as a flicker of motion caught the tail of his eyes. Whirling, he saw the business end of a sixgun start belching flame and lead in his direction. But his turning had carried him out of the line of fire, and he went to the floor, fanning out the coal oil lamp as he went. He got his own gun out and fired through the window. The sound of racing boots on the other side of the wall told him his man was getting away. Cursing, he raced outside. Standing there, listening in the dark, he heard nothing except the pounding of his own heart. The man had definitely gotten away now.

Thoughtfully, he locked Bailey's office and walked back toward the main street, certain now that Ben had nothing to do with the killing of the banker. Ben was safe in jail so he couldn't have tried to kill Kennedy. Then a premonition rose in him. Carl Lund was racing toward him.

"Kennedy," the deputy yelled as he ran up. "Ben Price has busted clean out of jail!"

"What!"

"Price busted out!"

"When?"

"Maybe a half-hour ago. I've been looking for you."

Kennedy thought, *Hell, it could have been Ben after all. What a stinkin' mess.*

Kennedy asked, "Where were you?"

"Gettin' him something to eat over at Chun Lun's cafe. Price said he hadn't eaten all afternoon."

"Maybe," Kennedy snarled, "you planned it that way so you'd have an alibi."

Ignoring, the statement, Lund asked, "What're you goin' to do?"

"We're goin' to try and track him down," Kennedy said grimly. "We got to move. He has a good head start."

Together they walked toward the jail house. They were still a block away when a cowboy came running.

"Sheriff," he panted, "Price said to tell you he's waitin' for you down at the Castle Bar. Said you was a crooked damn lawman with a thievin' deputy! Crooked, he said!"

His face twisting, Lund touched his gun. "Why I'll show . . ."

"Shut up!" Kennedy growled. "Tell Ben I'm goin' to arrest him. Tell him to give himself up, and I'll see he gets a fair trial."

The cowboy shook his head doubtfully. "Doc's tryin' to talk him out of it, but he's in a mighty ugly mood. Claims as how you'n your deputy killed Bailey so's you could take over his holdin's around here. Says now you're tryin' to lay th' blame on him."

Boiling, Kennedy touched his own guns now. The thought of anybody accusing him of such unscrupulous action made him forget for a moment that he was a lawman.

"All right," he growled, "if he wants a fight, he'll get it. But I'm goin' to try to arrest him without it, if I can."

He thought sharply: *It was Ben. He lied to me. He never lied to me before. . . . Would he be facing me now if he tried to shoot me in the back a few minutes ago? You never know,* he thought bitterly. *You never know!*

Aloud he said, "How long has he been in the saloon?"

The cowboy squinted, calculating, "Maybe five minutes, Sheriff."

Then Ben had had time to take that shot at him. "Better go tell Ben to give himself up," he said.

"I'll tell him." The cowboy hurried away. Kennedy hoped Ben would give up. He watched as the cowboy disappeared into the saloon.

"Come on," he said, and he and Lund started toward the Castle Bar. They were half a block away when Ruth came out and hurried toward them, the light from the saloon silhouetting her slender figure.

KENNEDY stopped, waiting, feeling the impatience of his deputy beside him. He heard the whir of the cartridge chamber as Lund checked his gun. Then

Ruth came up quietly, and he could sense the worry in her voice. "Don't go down there, Bill. Ben'll kill you."

He could make out the frightened blur of her face in the darkness. "You should have thought of that before you let him out!" he snapped harshly and shoved past her, seeing Ben come out of the Castle Bar with Doc Holmes cowering out of the line of fire behind him.

"Bill!" Ruth gasped. "I . . ."

The rest of it was lost as Ben called out. "This is it, you damn good-for-nothin' law dog. You'll never arrest me for something I didn't do!"

Kennedy stepped forward. For him now, there was only the two of them there in the street. He faced Ben squarely, only feet between them. "Come off it, Ben," he said wearily. "You're under arrest. Give me that gun your sister gave you Ben. If you're innocent, I'll find it out!"

Ben laughed sarcastically. "You know who killed Bailey," he sneered. "And you know why. You wanted to take over his holdin's, foreclose on the little ranchers. You was gonna be rich, Kennedy. But I'll put a stop to it. Draw now or get outta town!"

Kennedy bent his knees a little, getting ready for the sudden effort of drawing his gun and firing. But somehow he couldn't do it. He had to try to talk Ben out of it once more.

"Give me that gun, Ben."

"Quit foolin' around," Lund growled beside him. "Get it over with."

Ben laughed. "You got the devil's own deputy, Kennedy. Ruth didn't break me out. You got it all wrong. It was . . ."

Ben's words were lost. The explosion of Lund's gun numbed Kennedy's ears. Echoes pummeled against the clapboard buildings. Ben tried to draw but a slug ripped into him. He jerked to one side, half turned, fell on his side and lay perfectly still in the dust.

"Damn you!" he cried furiously, "why'd you do that?"

Spinning, Kennedy stared at the smoking gun in his deputy's hand, the tight smile on his face.

Lund's smile faded. "He was goin' to shoot you, wasn't he?"

But Kennedy wasn't listening now. He was looking down at Lund's smoking gun, seeing for the first time the .44-40 cartridge in his belt. He knew then who had killed Bailey. The whole thing fell together like the pieces of a puzzle. Simple little things that he'd overlooked came back to him now.

"Lund," he said quietly, "you're under arrest for the shooting of Bailey, and, if he dies, for the killin' of Ben Price!"

"You're crazy!" Lund's eyes showed his disbelief. "What's got into you, Kennedy? Hell, man, I'm your deputy."

"Deputy?" Kennedy said slowly. "Yeah, I reckon you are a deputy, like Ben said—the devil's own. You took Ben's rifle when we were out there, killed Bailey with it and left it in his office. You just got out ahead of Ben. That .44-40 cartridge in your belt proves it was you, Lund."

Behind him, Kennedy heard Ruth sobbing as she bent over Ben. Then Lund started to swing his gun around. Kennedy's own hands hung loosely at his sides. He'd never get his gun out in time.

Statement required by the Act of August 24, 1912, as amended by the Acts of March 3, 1933 and July 2, 1946 (Title 39, United States Code, Section 233), showing the Ownership, Management, and Circulation of .44 Western Magazine, published bi-monthly at Kokomo, Indiana for October 1, 1952. 1. The names and addresses of the publisher, editor, managing editor, and business managers are: Publisher, Henry Steeger, 205 East 42nd St., New York 17, New York. Editor, Henry Steeger, 205 East 42nd St., New York 17, New York. Managing editor, None. Business manager, None. 2. The owner is: Popular Publications, Inc., 205 East 42nd St., New York 17, New York, Henry Steeger, 205 East 42nd St., New York 17, New York, Shirley M. Steeger, 205 East 42nd St., New York 17, New York. 3. The known bondholders, mortgagees, and other security holders owning or holding 1 percent or more of total amount of bonds, mortgages, or other securities are: None. 4. Paragraphs 2 and 3 include, in cases where the stockholder or security holder appears upon the books of the company as trustee or in any other fiduciary relation, the name of the person or corporation for whom such trustee is acting; also the statements in the two paragraphs show the affiant's full knowledge and belief as to the circumstances and conditions under which stockholders and security holders who do not appear upon the books of the company as trustees, hold stock and securities in a capacity other than that of a bona fide owner. Signed, Henry Steeger, Publisher. Sworn to and subscribed before me this 7th day of October, 1952. Eugene Jelinek, Notary Public, State of New York. Qualified in Bronx County, No. 03-1962300. Certificate filed in Bronx and N. Y. counties. My Commission expires March 30, 1953. (Seal)—Form 3526—Rev. 8-50.

"Get him, Doc," Kennedy yelled and, as Lund whirled to look, Kennedy grabbed at him. Cursing, Lund leaped away and Kennedy dived aside, his hand groping for his gun as Lund fired. Two slugs tore into Kennedy, but Doc Holmes got his gun out and lined it on Lund. Lund's face went white with fear.

"No, Uncle, no!" he screamed.

He was still screaming when the slug from Doc Holmes gun ripped into him. He gurgled, tried to turn, then fell on his face, the dust puffing up around him. He lay still.

"Whew," Doc puffed, "I'm glad that's over!"

Kennedy turned cold eyes on the sawbones. "Not quite," he said grimly. "Lund was just a tool. Somebody ordered him to kill Bailey, Doc."

Doc Holmes little eyes narrowed in his puffy face. "What do you mean?"

The pain in his shoulder was worse now, but he clinched his teeth against it and went on: "You had a little money, Doc. But when the new sawbones came to town, you lost most of your practice and your money kept dwindlin'. You took what money you had and made a batch of loans through the bank, hoping you'd make enough to keep livin' without your practice. But it didn't pay off fast enough, so you tried to get Carlton Bailey to foreclose on them notes. He wouldn't have any part of it so you sent for your nephew, Lund. You had Bailey killed because he threatened to tell me all about it. You planned to lay the blame on Ben. But Ben didn't look guilty enough, and so you planned to get rid of him and me in a gun fight, didn't you, Doc?"

"I'm a doctor, Sheriff, not a killer." Doc Holmes growled.

"Sorry, Doc, but you can't get out of it. Somebody went into Bailey's office and took all the notes which you had signed. You did that, Doc. The lock wasn't tampered with, so whoever went in had to have a key. And you had it. Remember, Doc? I gave it to you so you could bring a wagon around for Bailey's body. We'll probably find those notes either on you or in your office."

Doc Holmes knew he was through then and he started backing away, his beady little eyes searching for a way out. But there was no way out. He brought the gun he'd killed Lund with into line and pulled the trigger. The slug struck the ground beside Kennedy, shooting dirt into the air. Carefully, Kennedy pulled the trigger and shot him, his bullet catching the flabby Holmes in the chest, driving him over backwards. He hit the dust, bounced, lay squirming.

Somewhere a dog howled mournfully. Kennedy moved forward and stood staring down at Doc Holmes. The dog howled again—a spine-tingling, long drawn out howl.

"Somebody stop that damn dog," Doc Holmes gasped. "Somebody stop that damn dog. Don't he . . . know . . . I'm dyin'?"

No one moved. The dog kept howling. Doc Holmes' eyes glazed over, and he stopped his squirming and lay still. Wearily, Kennedy looked down at him, the blackness creeping over him, too. He felt himself falling.

Then Ruth's cool hands touched his face, and he heard her sigh of relief. "His scalp's cut pretty bad," she said, "but he'll live. Somebody go tell Doc Overby we got some more business for him."

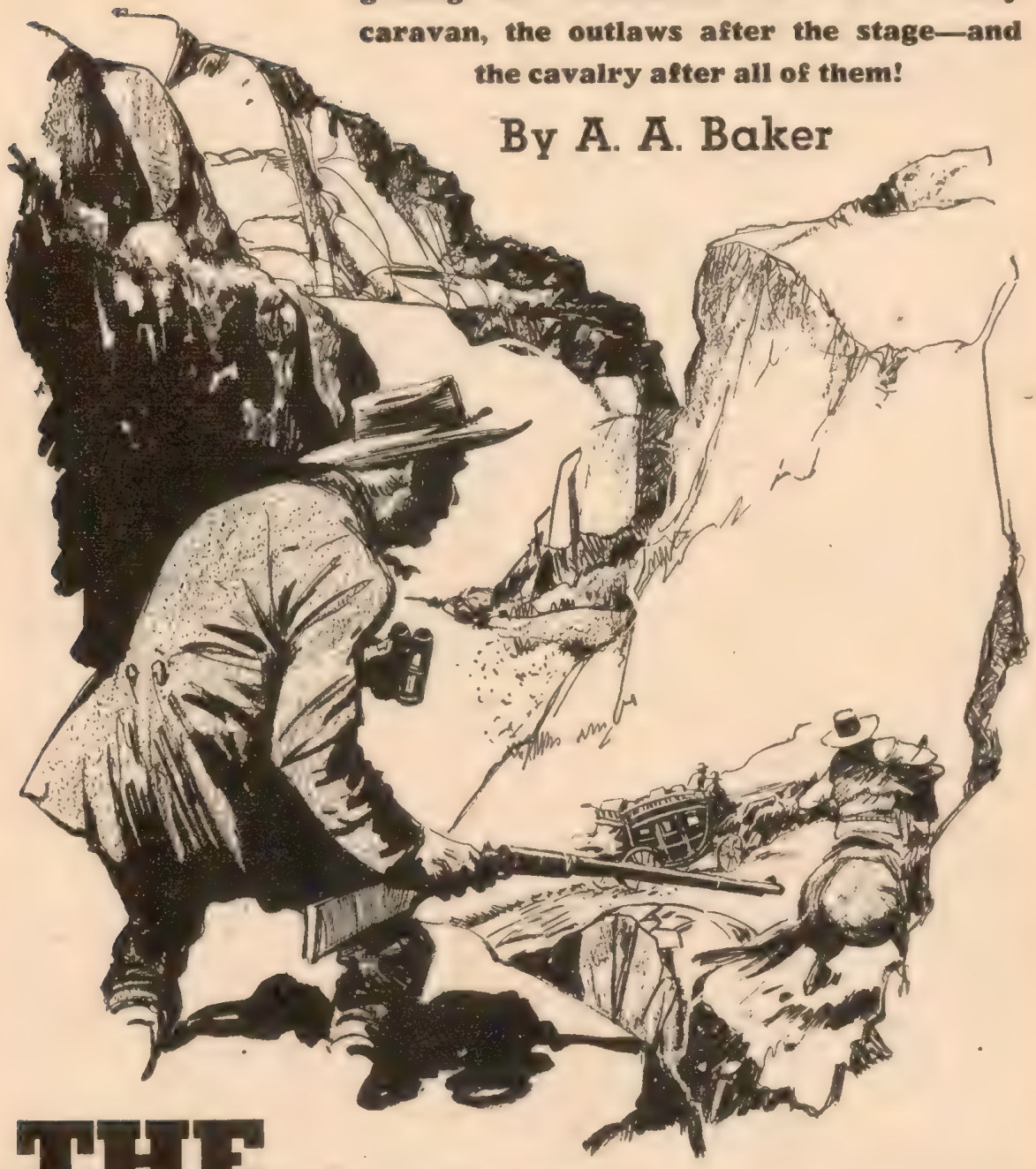
He opened his eyes ond looked into her smiling blue eyes. Ben stood behind her, clutching his shoulder, blood seeping through his fingers. But Ben grinned through clinched teeth, and Kennedy smiled back. Then he looked at Ruth again.

"Gonna need a new deputy," he said. "One to stick with me for the rest of my life. Want the job?"

"Don't ask silly questions at a time like this," Ruth said, blushing, but he looked deep into her eyes and he knew it was going to be all right. ■ ■ ■

Judge Yontz figured to solve his problem by getting the Comanches after the whisky caravan, the outlaws after the stage—and the cavalry after all of them!

By A. A. Baker



Judge Yontz screamed but the stage continued toward the outlaws!

THE LONG SHOT

THE first rap of Judge Yontz's gavel was a gentle tap, as though the gavel-block was made of delicate china. His gaze around the courtroom was benign as the bailiff reached, with a long pole, and hooked the wheel holding the kerosene lamps against the open rafters

of the Pecos County Superior Court Room. The lamps were lighted and the wheel was hauled back to the ceiling before the judge tapped his gavel once again.

The hum of voices continued. Several lawyers, gathered in the back of the hall, chuckled at a private joke. A cavalry soldier raised a shade, and the squeak of flapping cloth rattled harshly. A teamster leaned across his neighbor and spat at the nearest spittoon.

Yontz's gavel rapped again, and he let it bounce in his hand. It became a tapping drum. An Indian shuffled across the bare boards of the floor, and the chair shrilled loudly as the Indian settled his heavy weight.

Judge Yontz frowned, his black brows lowering until his dark eyes were slits. His bushy black hair streaked with white became more noticeable as he hunched deeper into his chair and pawed at his string tie. The muscles along his jaw bulged as he glared down at the noisy courtroom. Then suddenly he was out of the chair.

He banged the gavel until the head flew off and shattered the window next to the startled soldier. The judge snarled and threw the gavel block at the group of lawyers, who ducked behind chairs.

The teamster shot to his feet and yelled, "Run for the hills! The judge's broke loose and ran out the door.

By now, the judge had his coat off, his string tie pulled loose and was hurrying around the side of the bench. As he stormed through the courtroom, the bailiff ran to the back door, shouting, "Court's Adjourned."

As the hall emptied, the judge glared around at the silent walls. Slowly, his fury drained away. His arms dropped from their fighting stance; the broad shoulder muscles relaxed, allowing his coat collar the room to crawl back to normal. The Indian opened bleary eyes, stared at the judge and shuffled out the front door.

Sadly, Yontz shook his head. "Damn," he muttered. "I did it again." He moved slowly towards his chambers, opened the door, crossed the faded carpet and lowered himself into his desk chair. He sat for a long time without moving in the dusky room.

A knock broke the silence, and the Constable's grinning face peered around the edge of the door. He lighted the lamp before he spoke. "Blew up again, didn't you? Means you've got something bottled up inside. Means you've got to get yourself all fired up before you can decide what to do."

"Look, you're just John Wardlow, constable and gunfighter," the judge said. "Your problems are solved with a sixgun." He held up a placating hand and hurried on. "I don't deny you're necessary. Mercury's such a wild, hell-raising town—too much so to be Capital of Pecos County—and it takes a quick shooting constable to keep order. Now, my problems are different. "Look . . ." he moved a quart of whisky to one corner of the desk. Both men stared at the whiskey, and finally the judge extracted two glasses from the desk and poured drinks. They nodded an unspoken toast and drank.

WHEN the whisky bottle was replaced at the corner of the desk, the judge continued. "Let's say this bottle stands for those wild Comanches. You've got one in jail—that was his father in court. Well, that Indian did the killing, and he'll be hanged for it, but the really guilty man is the one selling those Comanches the whisky. They've got a taste for liquor now, and the Fort Jenks troopers can't do much to keep order except to drive 'em back into the mountains. The teamsters' stations have been burned, and the stock run off, until now they have to have *ten* gun guards for every wagon. And what are those red devils after? Liquor. Nothing but liquor. They burn everything else."

"If those troopers," the constable said, "can ever catch those Indians out in the

open, it'll all be taken care of." The angled planes of Wardlow's face tightened into harsh lines.

The judge nodded agreement and continued. "Now here . . ." he rummaged under a litter of legal papers and extracted a Colt. He placed the weapon on the desk corner opposite the whiskey bottle. His movements were as deliberate as those of a chess player. Now this is for those Summer Canyon outlaws, holed up deep in the Madre Senno mountains. The law can't get in, but they can get out. The stages are robbed so often by bandits or chased by Indians that Blackwell's quitting and planning to operate via El Paso, missing Mercury altogether. Now that's a danged fine situation for a county seat! That isn't all." He rose and got a cavalry soldier's broadbrimmed hat down from a peg on the door.

"That soldier in the courtroom who was yanking the window shade. He's been charged with not paying his bills. Sutler's store at Fort Jenks is suing for payment." The judge carefully laid the hat on the third corner of his desk. "Well, that soldier hasn't been paid for three months. The damn army can't give escort to the stage people. They're too busy trying to dig Comanches out of the mountains. So the payroll don't get through from the east. Blackwell won't haul the payroll without escort. What are the soldiers to do when their bills come due?"

"Don't ask me, Judge." Wardlow's voice matched his thin, wiry body. "Those Indians would give their robes for liquor. The whole Indian nation can get scalp-happy on a couple quarts of alcohol. It's a mixture of chewing tobacco, red pepper, Jamaica ginger and black strap molasses. Stir in enough raw alcohol to thin it out and you got a barrel of firewater that'll set off dynamite without a fuse." He pointed to the whisky bottle on the desk corner. "They'd think that Irish whisky was ginger beer."

Unconsciously, the judge reached out for the glasses and the bottle. As he tipped the bottle, he saw a little too late that the cork was out, and the bottle rolled away from his hand in a slow, semicircular motion. The judge stared as the liquid gurgled out and slowly flooded the desk. His unblinking stare moved from the whisky, to the gun, to the cavalry man's hat.

Wardlow shrugged and stepped back. "I'll be getting on my night rounds," he said and left by a door that opened into the alley.

Left alone, the judge slowly wiped up the whisky with the hat, then polished the gun and silently spun the chamber. Then he settled himself into the chair as though prepared to stay right there until his problem was worked out.

The sun came up fast, throwing out harsh fingers of light that spread across the bluffs. The black rocks faded and merged into the rainbow-colored gross-grained levels of the buttes. The mesas were as color-streaked as a layer cake, done by an overly enthusiastic baker who had splashed every layer with a different color. The cerise fingers crept up Mercury's Circle Street and brushed the dusty windows with a blurry reflection of the mesas. The town suddenly became light, and the morning heat attacked the courthouse.

Judge Yontz wrote his name on the bottom of a legal paper with a scratching pen. He reached out and held his hand over the green lamp shade and blew against the yellow flame. Slowly, he gathered the fresh litter from his desk and scraped it all into a drawer. He leaned back and smiled as he heard John Wardlow's slow steps on the short flight of stairs.

"Quiet night, Judge." Wardlow swung his holsters forward as he slumped wearily into a chair. "Circle Street's getting real tame. They used to call it the first ten blocks outside of hell." He sighed. "There were a couple of fights, but there always will be as long as people mix gunpowder with whisky."

"Then your job's getting easier." Judge Yontz stated. "I've got a plan."

Wardlow looked at him and shuddered. He waited for the judge to continue.

For a moment, the judge stared at the ceiling. Then he snapped, "We're going to dry up Mercury and the whole danged Pecos County!"

The constable swallowed. "That's a mighty big undertaking," he said.

"If it's too big a job for you, John Wardlow, just say so, and . . ."

THE peace officer rose to his feet, glaring at the speaker. "You give the orders, judge. When I can't carry them out, I'll tell you." He understood the judge completely and knew that when he shouted in that tone, trouble followed. For both.

"Right." The judge handed over two legal papers. "Post that on the front of the courthouse, then take the other one to Miller's place and tell him to run off about two hundred posters saying the same thing. Tell him to put it in his paper, too." He watched as the constable lowered his head to read the paper.

"I'll *tell* you what it says, in plain talk. The citizens of Mercury, and the county of Pecos, no longer have the right to drink liquor."

"That'll make my job real easy." The constable shifted his sixgun. "Now maybe all I'll have to do is fight every man in the county, except maybe the ministers, and—"

"You're the gunfighter," growled Yontz.

Wardlow shrugged. "That's right, I'm the gunfighter." He glanced at a new whisky bottle sitting on the desk. The judge reached for the glasses with a half-smile. He poured the liquor and sniffed the pleasant smell. Carefully, he recorked the bottle and reached for his glass.

Wardlow's gun flipped from the holster. With almost nonchalant skill, he fired twice. The glass, under the judge's hand, shattered. The other glass separated at the second shot, and the liquid seeped out and spread among the broken glass, littering the surprised judge's desk.

The reek of gun smoke mingled with the smell of spilled whiskey. Wardlow walked to the door in the stunned silence that followed. The judge's stony gaze dropped to the bottle as Wardlow walked to the door, stepped out, and closed it quietly behind him. Yontz reached for the bottle. The door almost immediately reopened. The judge bellowed as Wardlow fired again. The half-empty bottle flew apart. Wardlow grinned. "All good things start at home, Judge." He closed the door and was gone.

It took John Wardlow a full week to put the judge's ruling into effect. His eyes became red-rimmed; his long fingers were constantly hovering over the butts of his guns. Sometimes he carried his Colts in his hands as he made his rounds. The saloons were deserted, and lower Circle street became a place of shadows and sneaking men. The hotel cellars were locked and boarded over. He fought off a mob attack on the court house and took to snatching a few hours sleep in the judge's chambers. On the eighth day, he walked into the judge's office and slumped wearily into the chair.

The judge looked as if he'd been resurrected from a graveyard. He had lost weight, and his hair seemed to be growing straight up. His starched linen was cracked, and the studs were missing, his string tie was draped over the back of his chair. He studied the constable, then he spoke. "You still holding out?"

"Yeah. How about you, Judge?"

"Guess so." The judge sounded doubtful. "What's it look like today?"

"Well, a delegation left for the state capitol. They claim they'll come back with territorial troops. It'll take them maybe a week at the most. They seem sure they're going to get some liquor. I understand they expect to freight in at least three Studebaker wagons full. Doc Window and Doc Morris are about played out. Doc Window

claims that sudden withdrawal of liquor is enough to make some men real sick." He paused, then added laconically, "After seeing you, I think he's right."

The judge ignored the constable's insinuation. "How about the trail saloons? The Forty-Mile House?"

"All the outlying spots are dry, too. When we put the lid on in Mercury, the folks all rushed out to the roadway houses and drank everything in sight." John Wardlow's voice deepened. He spoke with the sincerity of a friend who is willing to do anything to help, but needs to be sure that the one he is helping knows exactly what he is doing.

"Look, Judge. Once those territorial soldiers arrive, they'll run you out of office. You *have exceeded* your authority. Taking away folks' liquor is a mighty dangerous thing to do. Shouldn't a vote be taken on something like that? I've held them off only because I've been lucky. I've only had to wing a few but if I should kill an honest citizen just because he's thirsty, then the town'll turn into a mob. You nor anybody else won't be able to stop a lynching. *My* lynching."

"Look at the record!" the judge shouted. "The Indians can't get the poison that makes them crazy killers. The soldiers aren't running into debt with Sutler's store. Those law-breakers haven't anything to rob, since Blackwells' and the freighters are operating by El Paso. This country is *fit* to *live* in now! Has been for a week."

"Yeah, sure," Wardlow growled. "But look in a mirror. You'll see a half-shot wreck. You'll have to admit that the pioneers who settled this country came loaded with beans *and* whisky. They've been raised on it and they don't want to give up their drinking. At least, not without having a right to decide for themselves. Who in hell do you think you are: Judge Yontz or Judge God?"

"That's a fair question. I'm Judge Yontz of Pecos superior court. If it's my duty to preserve law and order, then it's my duty to figure out how to do it. But. . . " he paused and began shucking papers off his desk until the floor was littered. Then he snatched down the cavalryman's hat and dug out the Colt. Grinning wryly, he moved the lamp to the corner where the whisky bottle had been.

"But," he continued, "you've got to plan things out. Now, look at this desk." He pointed. The hat was at one corner, the Colt at another, and the lamp at a third corner.

The constable inched forward, staring warily, as though humoring a small boy playing marbles.

"This lamp," the judge explained, "is the Indians, out on their hideaway. This Colt is the bandits in the Summer Canyon. This hat is the cavalry soldiers. Every danged man dried out and thirsting for a drink. What happens when we bring them all together?" He banged the desk triumphantly. "The bandits are wiped out, the Indians are taught a lesson they'll never forget, and the soldiers are sure of getting paid because Blackwell can run his stages and freight wagons into Mercury without being robbed by the bandits or scalped by thirsty Indians."

JOHN WARDLOW felt a bristling of the hair at the nape of his neck as the judge pointed a finger at the fourth corner of the desk and continued. "*This* is where the liquor wagons will come in, well south of the road Blackwell used for his stage route. That was the missing part of this puzzle. Telegraph the delegation at San Antonio that I've reconsidered and lifted the ban on drinking. Tell them to bring the wagons in as fast as possible. Wire Blackwell and tell him to bring one more stage through. Promise him that an escort will meet the stage before he gets into the Madre Senno mountains. Let the news out Blackwell is bringing in the payroll."

John Wardlow snorted and shoved back this chair. "When I telegraph for those wagons to come in—wagons loaded with liquor—those Indians will paint up for a raid. They'll butcher the teamsters, and the wagons will never reach Mercury. The ten men riding wth the wagons will have their scalps lifted, and the crazy drunk Indians'll raid every settler from here to the Mexican border."

"Keep going, John. Now tell me what'll happen to the stage when the outlaws hear about the payroll." The judge leaned back in his seat with a half-smirk.

"That'll be simple. You can't get an army escort and you know it. Blackwell will send out the stage, and the word'll spread that he's carrying the army payroll. That'll bring out the murdering gunslingers from Summer Canyon." He spun about in his pacing. "Will you still have that silly smile on your face when the bodies of the driver and his guards are brought in?"

"Now, John," the judge's tone was amiable, don't get rough with the judge of Pecos' superior court. Just do what you've been told. I'll repeat your instructions briefly. Telegraph the territorial capital and get the delegation to send the liquor wagons on. Telegraph Blackwell to get his stage started. Spread the word about the army payroll he's supposed to be bringing in. And that's it. Got that all straight?"

"Yeah," snapped the constable, "I got it all straight and—" a small tuck appeared at each side of his tight mouth—"I've got a sneaking idea that you know what you're doing." But his expression still seemed to carry a lingering doubt.

"Tell you what, John. You meet me on top of Butcher's Mesa." He pulled a big watch out of the pocket of his black silk wescoat. "Let me see, it's now ten A. M., Saturday. Meet me on the Mesa at ten A. M., Monday morning. I'll be on the west side of the Mesa. I've been ten days spinning a web, and I'll let you be present to see it catch the dandiest mess of flies any web ever caught."

"Judge," the constable's voice was almost pleading, "can I tear down those posters and pass the word that the folks will soon be able to buy a drink?"

"Good Lord!" The judge half-rose in panic. "No! Not till the trap's sprung. We'd have half the population riding out to meet those liquor wagons and messing up the whole plan. The Indians would come out, and the outlaws wouldn't dare to. The Indian scout will pick up the wagon train, and those outlaws won't have a bit of trouble getting wind of the stage carrying the army payroll."

"All right, Judge." Wardlow's back was tense as he opened the door to the alley. He freed his guns before he stepped out.

On the appointed day, Monday, Wardlow rode into the blazing morning sun toward Butcher's Mesa. The sun flooded the Mesa and the floor of the hot plain with a bloody hue, and John Wardlow wondered uneasily if the blood of the stagedriver, or the teamsters, might not add their color to the sun's reflection before the day was out.

Reaching the wall of the Mesa, he tied his horse in the shade of a tree, extracted his rifle and canteen from the saddle and began the dangerous climb to the top. At the top, he lay quietly for a few seconds, dripping with a perspiration.

Judge Yontz bellowed from the far side of the Mesa, and John Wardlow rose and strode across the sandy surface to join him.

The judge pointed. "There's the web, right in the middle of the plain. Over to the right is the Madre Senno with the Summer Canyon hideout. Beyond that, is where the stage will come in. See the tracks cutting through the mesquite?" He ignored Wardlow's nod, and his words gathered momentum.

"Over to the left is Comanche country. They'll ride out any time now. Maybe that faint dust streak is them starting. And from there—" he pointed directly ahead—that's how the wagons'll come in. Remember my desk top? The lamp for the Indians, the Colt for the bandits and the hat for the cavalry?"

"I remember." Wardlow shucked a shell out of his rifle and caught it with a steady hand. He stared out at the scene. "Where are the soldiers?"

"They'll be along. The colonel agreed to bring a troop out, once I convinced him that the Indians would come out." He drew a pair of army glasses from a leather case and stared toward the south. "The wagons are coming!" He swung the glasses to the southeast, his voice becoming loud with excitement. "There's the stagecoach, dropping out of the mountains. We'll soon be able to see the outlaws."

HE PACED restlessly, as the judge's trap unfolded. The dust rose from the desert in waves as it was caught by the rising heat. The Indians, who easily numbered over a hundred, came on at a trot.

The judge's voice was jerky with suspense. "*There* are the outlaws!" Wardlow spun about and stared. The stage was visible now, and the bandits weren't trying to conceal their movements, but were riding hard to intercept the payroll stage.

To the south, the Indians had spotted the liquor wagons and had turned off. Faint yelps reached the two watchers on the Mesa top. Death was riding the plain, and Wardlow suddenly realized that the timing was off. "Where in hell are the troopers?" he barked at the judge.

The judge swung the glasses toward Mercury and shouted, "Coming from behind!" His body twisted with the glasses. "They're circling below the Mesa and are coming up behind the Indians."

"Then they won't cross the outlaws' path!" Wardlow's voice held a positive tone of doom. "That stage'll never get clear unless they turn south and reach the protection of the troops."

Yontz's face was bleak as Wardlow shouted furiously. "Start throwing lead! Maybe the stage driver will hear the reports. I'll get out there and try to reach them." Yontz nodded as Wardlow ran swiftly for the edge of the wall. He heard the judge's rifle bark as he slid over the rim and, with leaping strides, scrambled down the steep bank.

Judge Yontz cursed, screamed and pumped lead out onto the plain but the stage continued it's smooth drift toward the point of interception with the outlaws. He felt like a buzzard, circling and watching over some dying animal far below.

The stage driver evidently hadn't noticed the outlaws or the Indians, and the Mesa shadows hid the troopers. The bandits thought they were hidden as they raced forward. None of them paid any attention to the judge who was blasting futile shots and curses.

He turned to watch the troopers race up behind the dusty path of the Indians. The guidon made a blurred splash of color against the heat-whitened plain. The blue uniforms looked brave against the saber flashes. A tinny bugle blared the charge, and the horses leaped forward at the yells of the soldiers. The Indians turned away from the wagons too late. Yontz could see the powder explosions and could hear the rattle of the revolver shots as the cavalrymen rushed into the group of surprised Indians.

Yontz yelled in excitement as his eye caught the lunging horse of John Wardlow appear from under the bluff below him. The rider was bent straight forward in a frantic effort to cut across the path of the bandits. Puffs of dust arose from the pounding hooves of his racing horse and sounded like echoes from the troopers'

shots. The stage rumbled toward the ambush, and Judge Yontz strained forward until he thought he could hear the creak of the leather springs and the jangle of the buckles of the traces as they snapped against the wagon tongue.

Just a little too late, the bandits spotted John Wardlow. They started to swing around, drawing their guns, but the constable whooped and headed straight into their ranks. He practically stood in the stirrups, firing both sixguns. A bandit's horse reared, and went down. John Wardlow drew his galloping horse to a sudden halt and started slashing with his empty guns. The screams of the surprised men could be heard, and then, Wardlow was again racing off toward the stage.

Yontz had to blink rapidly to clear his vision. He had never seen such performance in his life before. He heard Wardlow's shouts of warning and he muttered a thankful prayer as he watched the stage swing south toward the melee the soldiers were in. The teamsters' wagons had halted, and the men were watching the battle. Hoarsely, Yontz whispered, "Come on outlaws. . . . Follow the stage. . . .That's all. . . . Just follow that stage."

As though obeying his whispered command, the outlaws regrouped and struck out ofter the racing stagecoach, running right into the hands of the troopers.

* * *

Much later, Yontz and John Wardlow broke away from the torchlight parade that still twisted through the first ten blocks of Circle Street. They settled down in the judge's chambers and relaxed in the darkened room. Exuberant yells from the celebration flooded into the room. An occasional pistol shot ripped through the night. Finally, John Wardlow struck a match and reached for the green globe on his desk.

The judge grinned and shook his head, remembering the broken bottle. "Don't waste good whisky, John." He searched through his desk and found two glasses. Then, gently, he unscrewed the wick holder. As the constable silently watched, the judge poured the liquid into the glasses, and pushed one toward his officer.

"Drink up, John. I found out a long time ago that it was wise to keep a little liquor in reserve and, what better reservoir could there be than in the base of that lamp?"

"Look, Judge, let me get this all straight." Wardlow's voice was still tense. "You plotted this deal the day . . . the day you cleaned out the court? You figured that you would dry up the town until you could get the Comanches out after the wagons, and the bandits out after the stage?"

"Yes." The judge beamed. "It worked out, didn't it? The troops got their Indians, we got the outlaws wiped out, and Blackwell can now bring his stages safely into Mercury. Yes, sir. That's my job. Preserving law and order in this wild country. Sometimes you've got to do it the hard way. Now, drink up." He raised his glass and drank deeply.

Wardlow stood, watching the judge, holding his glass at hip level. The tuck appeared at the corners of his mouth as the judge gasped, gagged, and then spit the liquid across the room.

"My goodness, Judge, I forgot to tell you," John Wardlow's voice was warmly sympathetic, "but I just got to wondering if that lamp might not be running on whiskey so. . . I refilled it with kerosene, colored with a little plug tobacco, when you made the town dry. I didn't want temptation sitting right on top of your desk, and as I was feeling a little poorly that day, I had myself a couple myself. It certainly is good to know that you suffered right along with the rest of the citizens and never touched that private reservoir until just now." ■ ■ ■

PLAIN SAILING

By
Carleton Carr

THEY were used to strange sights, those hard-bitten citizens of Westport, Missouri, but one spring day in 1853, they looked down the dusty main street and gasped incredulously. It couldn't be true, and yet it was. Swooping gracefully down upon them, its white sail billowing in the wind, was a sailing wagon.

It came to stop before Yoakum Tavern, and its pilot furled his sail, locked his brakes, and jumped ashore. Without a word to the gaping townfolk, he strode purposefully toward the bar with a seafarer's wide-legged, rolling swagger.

After whiskey had washed down the dust, he announced that his name was Thomas, that he was Navigator of the Prairies, and that he proposed to form a company to trade with Santa Fe.

The town's leading citizens shared his liquor and listened as he listed the many advantages of sailing wagons. Speed was one; the expense of feeding and watering animals was another. And the remarkable craft would scare the living daylights out of the Redskins. Thomas spoke eloquently and on that very day the Overland Navigation Company was born, with a working capital sufficient to finance the building of a ship of the plains.

The craft, when it was completed, resembled a Conestoga wagon, but there all likeness ended. For this wagon was twenty-five feet from stem to stern, and had a beam of seven feet. Its huge wheels were twelve feet in diameter, and the huge mast carried a sail large as a circus tent. It took four oxen to drag the craft to the town limits, where all the members of the company—with the exception of Doctor Parker—climbed aboard. The Doctor, although he didn't say so, apparently had misgivings about the outcome of the test, and considered it would be wiser to remain on hand to minister to the wounded if an accident occurred.

Smiling confidently, Windwagon Thomas took his place, hoisted sail, and waved to the bystanders. The wind filled the sail, and the wagon lurched heavily forward. The wind gusted, and the wagon shot forward like a frightened bison. The passengers begged Thomas to slow down, but he merely grinned more broadly. Terrified, Doctor Parker whipped his mule forward to be on hand for an emergency, but the mule didn't stand a chance.

Finally Thomas veered around, saying that he would now demonstrate how the craft could sail against the wind. It was at this point that everything went wrong.

Something happened to the steering mechanism, and the wagon went around and around in a crazy circle, careening dangerously on two huge wheels. White with fear, uttering hoarse cries and curses, the passengers dived overboard. Thomas, like a

(Continued on page 113)

Hunted Lawman

Old Pete pleaded: "Larry, don't make me do this!"

Throughout the lawless badlands, it was open season on the hide of Larry Remington, ex-deputy. And on the range of honest men, he was hunted and damned as a shoot-in-the-back killer!

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By T. T. Flynn

DEPUTY Sheriff Larry Remington struck the Rio Salado road in the early afternoon, heading for Malpai, on the Gila. Stubble roughed his good-natured face. Hard riding had gaunted him perceptibly, and gunfighting had emptied most of the cartridge loops in his belts. Disappointment rode back to Malpai with him. But the rest of the posse, who should already be back, might have better news about the bandits who had taken all the cash in the Malpai bank.

He swung down the Rio Salado road, where it curved sharply around the prow-like point of a higher ridge, ran straight for a quarter of a mile, and then turned sharply right between the ridge and the river. He was halfway along this stretch when a rifle snapped thinly somewhere ahead, and a sledge-like blow knocked him reeling in the saddle.

The tough little claybank bronc spun half around and went into a wild spasm of bucking. A numbness in Larry's side held him helpless. He felt himself slipping, and grabbed for the one thing most important to him at the moment—the old carbine in the saddle scabbard, and dragged it free as he was bucked off.

Larry thought he heard a second and third shot, but they missed him. He landed hard, sprawling at the side of the road, shot over the edge, and slid down the steep bank in a cascade of dust and small stones.

A clump of silvery-gray chamiso at the bottom stopped him. For a moment he lay helplessly, mouth and nose full of dust, breath gone. The numbness in his side

oozed into pain as he finally stirred. Opening his shirt, Larry found the distinct imprint of his gun in the flesh, but no blood, no wound. He had been half-twisted around in the saddle when the blow struck. What had happened was plain. A rifle bullet had smashed squarely into his gun butt, driving the weapon into the flesh, deflecting the bullet.

He grinned grimly to himself at the thought of his narrow escape. That bushwhacker had almost gotten him!

The Salado bank jogged a little here, gullying in slightly where he had slid down. The opposite side of the shallow gully hid him from the crest of the hill where the gun had barked. Quiet once more gripped the spot; only the ripple of the shallow Salado current was audible as Larry reached for the carbine and cautiously wriggled over, and up, to a point where he could see the ridge along the opposite side of the road.

A standing figure was silhouetted against the skyline on top of the ridge near the next turn. Too far away to be recognized, the man held a rifle as he searched the river bank for some sign of his victim.

Larry carefully pushed the carbine into position, steadied the sights and squeezed the trigger. The gun's report seemed to push the silhouetted figure back, down, out of sight. He grinned again and settled down to wait.

It was a full hour later when he scrambled over onto the road in a sudden rush. No shots greeted him. He kept going up the steep slope of the ridge and reached the top, winded but safe.

The claybank horse was standing at the turn, looking up at him. Warily Larry walked along the ridge to the spot where the stranger had dropped. No one was there now, but cigarette stubs and scraps of food showed where the stranger had spent some time waiting.

Behind two boulders which had been rolled together, three empty shells marked the spot where the man lad lain. Carefully he searched the ground. The sun glinted on a small silver concho button almost buried in the dry dirt.

DARKNESS was falling when Larry reached Malpai. When he passed Leander Castle's frame house, he called a greeting to Castle, who was watering some flowers beside the front steps. Leander turned his head, saw who it was, and made no reply.

That was queer. If Larry hadn't been in such a hurry, he would have stopped and joshed Leander about it. But a little farther on when Coll Baker, the harness maker, answered Larry's greeting by turning his back, walking into the house and slamming the door, Larry rode on with a frown deepening between his eyes. Coll Baker was a cheery soul who never did anything like that unless something was wrong.

Larry tried not to admit it, but a little knot of worry was gnawing down inside when he stopped at the livery stable to leave the claybank for the night.

Sam Scoggins, who ran the livery stable, was tilted back in his chair just inside the wide stable entrance.

"Howdy, Sam," Larry greeted as he swung down out of the saddle. Sam grunted something and stood up as Larry explained: "There's a bullet scratch here to fix, an' I want him curried good an' bedded down right. He's wore out an' earned himself a party for a few days."

Sam Scoggins was comfortably fat and usually placid and cheerful. But now, in the fast falling darkness, his broad face looked unfriendly. Sam's voice was curt too.

"I ain't got any room for your hoss tonight, Remington."

"What's eatin' you, old-timer?" Larry demanded. "You always did have room to take in my horse."

"Not tonight," Sam refused flatly. "And don't give me no argument about it. I'm running this here livery stable."

It was strange that Sam Scoggins, whose littered, dusty office, smelling of horse liniment and harness oil, had always been one of Larry's favorite loafing places, should act like that! Temper, prodded by Leander Castle and Coll Cranston, flared up.

"You always had room for him before!" Larry snapped. "You're takin' him in! Sabe!"

Sam Scoggins shrugged. "I'll take your hoss," he agreed curtly, "because he's a hoss an' wore out. But it ain't because of you shootin' off your mouth. I'll unsaddle him. Get along to whatever you're gettin' along to."

Larry swallowed his temper. "What's the matter with you, Sam? You never acted like this before."

Sam Scoggins led the claybank back into the dark, pungent depths of the stable. "I ain't arguin' with you," he said over his shoulder. "I took your hoss in. That's all there is to talk about."

Larry turned, walked out the door and strode down the street. Pete Blythe, the sheriff and Larry's boss, would know about this. Three men in a row wouldn't act as they had without something being wrong, without some reason.

Pete's little one story frame house, which he and Larry occupied alone now, was at the other end of town. On the way, Larry turned in at the Nugget Bar. Half a dozen horses were out at the hitchrack; eight or ten men were inside. A quick, cold silence fell as Larry entered.

"Whisky, Luke," Larry said, stopping at the front end of the bar. But the words fell flat, hollow against the unnatural silence of the room.

Larry's face was bleak as he looked along the bar at the men. For the first time since he had come to Malpai, a ragged, hungry kid, son of a dead outlaw, he felt a wall of unfriendliness closing in around him. Down inside, something began to hurt that this should happen.

"I just got in," Larry said to Bob Langdon, who had ridden out with the posse. "How'd you fellows make out?"

Langdon took a drink of water and replied shortly, "All right, I guess."

The bartender set the bottle and glass down and turned back for water. Larry poured his drink. "Bud Taylor's back, I guess?"

"Bud Taylor's dead. He was brought in this mornin'," Bob Langdon said.

The whisky bottle almost slipped from Larry's hand.

"Who found him?" he demanded unsteadily. "Where was he? Bud was all right last trace I had of him."

Langdon did not answer.

Jess Parker, one of the three Parker brothers—Ed, Mitch and Jess, who owned the P Bar Three ranch north of the Gila—spoke down the bar with a cold challenge.

"Where's the bank's cash you went after?"

Larry gulped his drink. He needed it. "I'm askin' about Bud Taylor right now."

Jess Parker shrugged. "Jughead Taylor'll tell you about it. He's been lookin' for you."

MORE customers were coming in just then. Larry nodded and spoke huskily as he turned to see who they were. "I've got to see Jughead. Anybody know where he is?"

"I'm here, damn you!" Jughead Taylor said savagely. "Now let me hear you talk fast before I kill you."

Jughead Taylor looked as ugly as a jughead horse, massive as a mountain pine, with a ragged black beard, a crooked nose and thick coarse eyebrows. Jughead had little regard for anyone who crossed him. He was one of the old-timers, who had come into the country when the nearest railroad was a thousand miles to the east, and Apache raiding parties hunted white settlers more often than they did deer.

In those days you had to be tough, stubborn and a bit savage yourself to live de-

cently against the heavy odds. Those old-timers still had—like Jughead Taylor—a harsh, proud side given to few words and quick action.

Jughead stood half a head taller than Larry. He was armed. So were the four grim Busted Jug men who had followed him in.

Larry felt cold inside. This wasn't the time for emotion. Those Busted Jug men were primed to kill. "Taylor," Larry said, "I don't know what you're talkin' about. They've just told me Bud's dead."

"Yeah. Bud's dead." Jughead Taylor's voice had a tragic, flat emptiness. Bud had meant a lot to him.

"Who killed him?"

Bud's father—he was father of Kareen Taylor, too, the girl Larry was going to marry—stood a few steps away, head slightly forward, his big hands down at his sides. He looked poised, waiting for some action he had already decided on. He spoke again with a harsh indifference, as if not caring much what the answer was.

"What kept you out so long after the rest of the posse came in?"

"Mostly tryin' to catch the men Bud an' I followed when the posse split up."

A man coughed. It sounded loud in the silence which waited for Jughead's next words.

"Was you with Bud all the time?" Jughead demanded.

"You know I wasn't. I'd have known about his bein' dead," Larry replied curtly. "Bud an' I trailed two of the bandits south when the posse scattered. We caught up with 'em an' had a running gun fight till it began to get dark. Then the two men ahead of us split up."

"What made 'em do that?"

"How do I know? Maybe they were short of cartridges. Maybe they thought the rest of the posse was following. Maybe they just figured it was smart. But they split up. Bud took after one, an' I went after the other."

Jughead Taylor made an impatient gesture. His voice cut like the slash of a knife. "Bud knew better'n to split off after a killer who'd be apt to ambush him any minute. Bud'd stay with you, so there'd be one man left to keep fightin' if one got downed."

"Don't tell me what Bud did!" Larry snapped. "I was there. He went after one man, an' I went after the other. That's the last I saw of him."

"Whose idea was it?"

"Bud's idea. He didn't want to miss any chance to get back the bank's money. He said you were a heavy stockholder an' the loss would hit you mighty hard if the bank had to close up."

Jughead made another impatient gesture. "Did you get the man you went after?"

Reluctantly Larry had to admit that he didn't. "I couldn't track him after dark. Next morning I followed the trail half a day an' then lost it. I spent all the next day circlin' south tryin' to cut it again, an' then landed back where I split off from Bud. Up Bud's trail, I found a dead stranger. Bud had got his man. From there Bud's tracks headed southeast, the way I had gone. It looked to me like Bud was aimin' to cut my tracks an' see what luck I'd had. But I lost Bud's tracks too, so I headed back to Malpai."

With that same flat emptiness in his voice, Jughead said: "An' then a couple of men cuttin' across country from Tucson found Bud. He'd been shot in the back an' left there in the open. There was powder burns in the back of his vest. Some envelopes from the bank was scattered around. He got the man with the money all right. Had the money along with him when he was murdered by an ornery wolf he thought was a friend."

Larry felt every eye in the room on him. He had to moisten his lips and swallow before he could answer. "An' somebody's cooked up the idea I murdered Bud?"

"An' hid the bank's money away until

you had need for it," Jughead Taylor added grimly.

"The man who started that is a double-damned liar!" Larry flared. "If he's a man, he'll face me with it!"

Jughead Taylor himself answered. "You're facin' him now! I started the story, Remington, an' there ain't anything in heaven or hell that'll make me believe you're innocent! Bud himself accused you!"

It didn't make sense. Jughead believed it. Everyone else in the room believed it. Larry fought down the desire to gulp another drink. He needed a steady head.

"Bud wouldn't of accused me of somethin' I didn't do," he replied with a fierce, growing bitterness. "He was dead, wasn't he? He couldn't have accused me of anything. It don't make sense."

"No one asked you to believe it!" Jughead said savagely. "The fact that you snuck back here to Malpai, instead of high-tailin' it on toward the border is proof you was sure your tracks'd been covered. But Bud outsmarted you, Remington. You shot him in the back, an' left him for dead, but Bud didn't die so easy. He come out of it long enough to open his tally book an' leave word in it for me. Look at this, you cow thief's maverick, before you get hung like your old man did over by Yuma!"

Larry had thought that the story of his past had died with the old man. How Jughead had discovered it didn't matter now. Nothing mattered but the dog-eared little tally book Jughead opened and was holding out.

It was Bud's tally book all right. The edge of the leaves were stained red. Jughead's gnarled finger held it open toward the back. There was a page smudged with bloody fingerprints. A pencil had left an unsteady, labored scrawl; Bud's last words on earth—Bud's damning accusation left behind to point an accusing finger from the grave. . . .

I'm dying.

Larry done it.

CHAPTER TWO

Escape In The Night

JUGHEAD TAYLOR shoved the tally book back into his pocket. "Bud hung it onto you, so why waste your breath?" he said violently. "Where's the bank's money?"

"Where's Pete Blythe?" Larry said.

"Pete's out lookin' for you, sick as he's been lately. Pete says if you was his own son an' done a trick like this, he'd hunt you down an' hang you."

Jess Parker interjected sourly, "Seein' as Blythe was the one who kept Remington around these parts in the first place, an' made him deputy, he oughta talk that way. But that's only talk. This deal calls for a new sheriff, like I've been tellin' you all day. An' I ain't the only one who feels that way."

"Talk about a new sheriff can wait!" Jughead snapped. "Right now this murderin' son here is gonna get the same kind of a send off his old man got. We'll string him up an' save a trial. But first we got to get that money. The bank's busted without it."

"So Pete thinks I done it too?" Larry muttered. "Pete's out lookin' for me?"

Sim Leeland, down at the other end of the bar, said, "How you gonna make Remington talk if he sets his mind agin' it? He's gonna get hung anyway, ain't he?"

Jess Parker stepped away from the bar, hunching up his gun belt and scowling. "Rope an' drag him out through the prickly pear," Jess suggested grimly. "A little of that an' he'll talk for the favor of a quick, easy hangin'. We all had money in the bank. I guess we can get it back now."

Larry heard that with a stony face. When a man was dragged that way, he died slow and hard. A rope dallied to a saddle horn dragged him across the rough range, through underbrush and over stones, until life slowly left the bruised, battered body.

Few more painful deaths could be devised than a drag through beds of prickly pear, where thousands of needle-sharp cactus thorns would break off agonizingly in the flesh.

The four Busted Jug men had their guns out. Larry didn't have a chance to go for his gun, even though they had been careless enough to leave him armed. Jughead Taylor was frowning as he considered Jess Parker's idea.

"Are you gonna tell where you hid that money?" he demanded. "Or do we have to drag you to make you talk?"

"Nothin' I can say will change you," Larry answered bitterly. "What's the use of talkin'? Let's have another drink first." Larry turned to the bar without waiting for a reply. "Drinks are on me, Luke—if anyone has got the guts to drink to a trip through the prickly pear."

Luke, the paunchy bartender, looked uncomfortable. Jess Parker stepped to the bar.

"His drinks are as good as anyone's, boys. Line 'em up, Luke. We'll all need a few shots before this is over."

A hard smile came over Larry's face as he saw man after man side the bar and reach for a glass and bottle. "Not drinkin', Jughead? How about you, Mart?" Larry asked, turning to the Busted Jug man who had stayed away from the bar to watch him.

Mart Kelly was squatty and thick-shouldered; his mustache was black, his look always straight and steady. He was Jughead's foreman and had been close to Bud Taylor. Now Mart's big, single-action Colt rested on his hip, hammer back, ready to drop. Mart's reply was disgusted.

"I wouldn't drink if you had the last bucket of water an' the last glass of whiskey in hell! Put your liquor down an' whip up your nerve, mister. You're gonna need it!"

Smiling thinly, Larry agreed, "I reckon I will need it, Mart. An' I'm glad there's one man here whose belly ain't bigger'n his convictions."

Larry turned back to the bar—the front end of the bar where he was standing—and pushed his hat back, and with the same motion flipped the hat at Mart and dove for the window not two steps away. Mart Kelly's gun roared.

Larry had figured on that, had known he'd probably get shot. Mart couldn't miss; his bullet got Larry in the shoulder. The deputy's crooked arm crashed through the window glass, and he hurtled outside into the dark night, falling against the ground with stunning force, rolling over, scrambling up, dodging back into the darkness. . . .

MART KELLY'S gun barked through the broken window after him. Inside the saloon, men were shouting, running. Back away from the street, the night was black. Mart Kelly's roaring Colt was shooting wild in the darkness.

Larry ran through the moonless night, blundering over fences, past houses where dogs barked loudly. Behind him shouting men galloped away from the front of the saloon spreading out to cut him off.

Here in Malpai he might go a dozen places. Pete Blythe's little frame house was one place. Sam Scoggins' livery stable was another. Larry could hear riders galloping. Blood was running down his arm. With his bandanna, he plugged the hole as best he could. Then, with a hard smile, he made for the livery stable. Fortunately, Sam Scoggins did not keep a dog. But as Larry came up to the back of the stable, someone galloped up to the front. The back door, by the manure pile, was unlocked. Rusty hinges squeaked slightly as Larry entered the black, cavernous interior.

Sam Scoggins and the rider were standing in the dim, yellow halo of a lantern at the front door.

"No telling which way he went. He's afoot. Ain't got a hoss yet that we know of."

"I ain't seen anything of him around here," Sam Scoggins spoke.

"Better get out your gun, Sam. Mart hit him, but if he gets this far, he'll be able to shoot."

"Damned foolishness lettin' him stand there with his guns," Scoggins grumbled. "If Jughead was gonna kill him, he should have disarmed him."

"The boys had him covered. It wasn't reasonable he'd make a break."

"I'll get out my old gun and cut loose if he shows up," Scoggins declared. When Sam emerged from his littered office, he was grumbling to the rider: "Whatever come over him to shoot Bud that way? He never struck me as likely to do such a trick."

"Courtin' Kareen Taylor, wasn't he" the rider answered. "Needed money, didn't he? Another thing nobody knowed until Jughead told it today—Bud knowed Remington's old man was hung for a hoss thief. The kid who come here to Malpai was on the run from the law. His name never was Remington. Bud didn't want his sister to marry that kind of trash, but he hated to bring it out. He never told anyone but Jughead. Now it looks like he might have spoke of it while him an' Remington was out alone, an' Remington did him in for it—an' for the money too. Maybe I better stay here with you, Sam."

"I don't need wet nursin," Sam refused grumpily. "I'll sit back there in the dark an' look sharp for him."

After the rider, who had warned Sam, had gone, horses stirred in their stalls. One horse nickered. Rats squealed and scurried in the hayloft. Sam Scoggins was humming dolefully to himself as he carried his chair back into the darker shadows.

The chair creaked as Sam sat heavily on it and tipped back against a stall front. And Larry, who had edged noiselessly forward, pushed a gun muzzle against Sam's side. "It's Larry, Sam."

Sam Scoggins almost fell off his chair. "Where . . . where'd you come from?" he stuttered. "Take that damn gun away."

Larry got Sam's gun and shoved it under his belt. "You sounded mighty bloodthirsty, Sam. I ought to plug you."

"Was you sneakin' back here listening?"

"It's mighty revealin' sometimes to hear what others really think about you, Sam."

Sam squirmed in the chair and recovered some of his composure. "I let you know what I thought when you brought your hoss in. I ain't changed my mind any. Take that gun out of my neck. It gives me the creeps."

"It'll give you worse'n that if I don't get my saddle on a fast horse mighty quick, Sam. Do I get it peaceable?"

"With that gun," Sam groaned, "you get the whole darn stable if you want it. But they'll catch you damned quick."

"Maybe they will," Larry agreed. "I'm plugged pretty bad in the shoulder. But they'll have a wildcat by the tail. Tonight ain't my night to be roped an' hauled through the prickly pear like they was fixin' to do."

Startled, Sam said, "Through the prickly pear? Who aimed to do that?"

"Jess Parker brought it up. Jughead Taylor agreed with him."

Sam was silent for a moment. Then he said, "Take that gun out of my neck. It ain't needed now. Maybe you're a skunk; maybe you oughta be hung, but I've knowed you too long to take part in havin' you dragged through any prickly pear."

Sam knew every rusty nail in his livery stable. He moved about in the darkness, grunting, swearing softly. "All right," he said finally, leading the horse out of the stall. "Get goin'. I'll keep the claybank. Don't ever show up around Malpai again. Understand?"

Pain made Larry wince as he climbed into the saddle.

"Tell Pete Blythe I didn't kill Bud an' don't know who did. Somebody tried to drygulch me out on the Salado road this afternoon. Maybe there's an answer there."

"Pete's out with a bunch of men lookin'

for you right now," Sam said gruffly. "You know what to expect if Pete finds you. Gimme my gun now. It ain't loaded."

"You danged old fire-eatin' hypocrite!" Larry chuckled, tossing the gun on the ground. He rode cautiously out of the entrance and turned north.

THE Busted Jug ranch buildings were eight miles north of Malpai, on Cold Creek. This evening the ranch house windows were lighted. Buckboards and buggies stood back of the house. Strange horses were in the corrals. Neighbors from miles around were inside doing what they could in the way of sympathy and help. Mostly they were women. The men were in Malpai or out with sheriff Pete Blythe.

The ranch dogs raised a clamor out in front. A woman visitor opened the front door and peered out. She saw a rider climbing stiffly out of the saddle in front of the porch. He stumbled slightly as he hit the ground. Holding the reins, he spoke to her. "Ma'am, will you ask Kareen to step out here a minute?"

Uncertainly she answered, "Just a minute." She closed the door quickly—too quickly—and huried back into the parlor with news that had upset her.

"He . . . he's out there in front! Larry Remington's out there asking for Kareen!"

Several men in the crowded parlor came to their feet. One of them rasped out curtly, "All right boys, I guess we'd better go out and see him."

Kareen was hardly twenty. Grief had hit her hard. She was pale as she turned toward the door.

"Don't go out. I'll see him," she said.

They protested. She ignored them. Larry saw her slender, black-clad figure come out the front door. She closed the door and came toward him.

"Kareen!" Lary said huskily.

A thin thread of hope had persisted in his mind. It died now before the hurt, the scorn, the bitterness in Kareen's reply. "How did you dare come here tonight with . . . with Bud in there in his coffin?"

"I was hoping you wouldn't believe it," Larry said dully. "I thought if one person'd know I didn't do it, it'd be you, Kareen. Why should I have done anything to Bud?"

"I've asked myself that all day," Kareen said unsteadily. "Why? I don't know why. I thought I knew you, but I didn't. At first I wouldn't believe it; then they showed me Bud's tally book. I had to believe it then. Hanging is too good for you, Larry."

"Bud's tally book can't be right," Larry insisted desperately. "I wasn't anywhere near him when he was killed."

The front door opened. A tall figure stepped out into the shadows at one side and closed the door. His hand was halfway under his coat.

"Mitch Parker, huh?" Larry muttered.

Kareen said nothing. The man moved toward them in the darkness. "Everything all right, Kareen?" he asked.

"Do your talkin' back a-ways, Parker," Larry warned coldly. "I took enough off your family tonight, when your brother Jess made another play for Pete Blythe's sheriff's job he's been tryin' so hard to get. Kareen, you'd better go in. There may be trouble out here."

Kareen sobbed with grief and anger. "I won't have any fighting at this house tonight! They'll take care of you soon enough, Larry. Mitch, come into the house with me!"

Mitch Parker—always hot-headed and stubborn—obeyed without argument. Gossip said that Mitch was interested in Kareen. This meek submissiveness was as good proof as any. The front door closed behind them, and the night was black and deserted once more.

Larry felt black and empty inside as he painfully climbed back into the saddle and rode away. No one tried to stop him. But that didn't mean much. Malpai would soon know he was heading north into the outlaw country—an outlaw himself now.

Larry grinned without mirth at the thought. His old man, dead these many years, would have guffawed loudly at this strange twist of fate that changed him from sheriff's deputy to outlaw in a few hours. Larry's chin dropped on his chest, his shoulders sagging as he rode. He was weaker; but other things were bowing his shoulders—those things he was leaving at Malpai and at the Busted Jug ranch. Everything was gone now.

CHAPTER THREE

Deputy Turned Outlaw

THE morning star was bright in the gray-black, false dawn when Navajo Jack's dogs challenged the lone rider who came to Cow Spring. The small adobe hut, deep in the bad lands, was dark and quiet as Larry dismounted, staggering from weakness. A few miles more and he'd have fallen off the horse.

"What you want?" Navajo Jack challenged behind the door.

"It's Remington, from Malpai," Larry answered. Speech was an effort. He was hanging onto the saddle horn when Navajo Jack came out with a lantern, took one look, handed the lantern to his squaw, who had followed, and half-carried Larry into the cabin. Vaguely Larry was aware that they worked on his shoulder, that he gulped hot coffee and relaxed. . . .

When he awoke, it was another day, and he was sick; in fact he was sick for several days.

Navajo Jack's squaw dressed the shoulder twice daily with herb preparations of her own. She fed him like a baby, silently, stolidly, but with an attentive regard in her dark eyes.

Most of the time Navajo Jack was around, impassive, inarticulate, yet alert to every detail. He asked no questions. Larry told him nothing. The first clear-headed day he had, Larry asked for his vest. The three empty rifle shells and the silver concho button were still in the pocket.

"Got any idea where this concho button came from?" Larry asked.

Navajo Jack turned the silver button between his stubby fingers. He was chunky, muscular, and wore his hair short, American style, and dressed American, too. His dark eyes regarded Larry without expression.

"Where you get this?" Navajo Jack asked.

"Found it where some hombres ambushed me on the Salado road."

The squaw was staring at the button. Her husband looked at her. Nothing visible passed between them. She turned away without further interest. Navajo Jack handed the button back.

"Good Navajo silver work," he said vaguely.

"I'd like to find the fellow who dropped it."

"Why he try to shoot you?" Navajo Jack asked slowly.

"I don't know," Larry said from the pallet on the floor where he was lying. "Got any idea who he was?"

Navajo Jack shook his head. "Not savvy," he stated.

But Larry thought otherwise. The squaw had had an idea about that concho. Navajo Jack had warned her with a look.

The Woolly Rock district was not one particular nest of outlaws. Spreading over a lot of territory, with bleak, little-known mountains in the north, the Woolly Rock country was a no-man's-land into which outlaws could ride and vanish.

They left the ranchers around Malpai pretty much alone. Pete Blythe had raided fast and savagely with hard-shooting posses whenever the outlaws gave cause for such action. Pete's authority had been pretty much respected.

Every day or so riders stopped at Cow Spring to water up, now and then to camp for the night. Some of them came into

Navajo Jack's house and ate. All were strangers, easily recognizable as outlaws.

On the eighth day, Larry was hunkered in the sun by the front door when four riders loped into view. Navajo Jack, cross-legged on the ground nearby, repairing an old bridle, stared at the approaching men. He stood up on silent, moccasined feet.

"I think maybe you go inside," he said stolidly, and followed Larry in, buckled on a gun belt, took a shotgun from the corner and went out again.

Larry strapped on his own gun and was waiting inside the doorway when the four men rode up. One of them had been past a couple of days before. He spoke to Navajo Jack. "That deputy from Malpai's stayin' with you, ain't he?"

"Uh-huh," Navajo Jack grunted.

"He's off of his range. We ain't havin' any deputy sheriffs back in here. Trot him out. We'll take care of him."

"This my place," Navajo Jack said stolidly. "He's my friend. What you want?"

The man who answered was squatty and powerful, with a flat, scowling face under the wide brim of an old Stetson. "What the hell you doin' so friendly with a deputy?" he demanded roughly. "You turnin' lawman yourself?"

"This my place," Navajo Jack repeated. "He's my friend."

"Well, friend or no friend, we've come for him."

"Sheriff wants him too," Navajo Jack said. That was the first hint he had given that passing strangers had brought word of the trouble in Malpai. "Two hundred dollars reward for him," Navajo Jack said.

The first man sneered. "You can't make an outlaw out of a deputy. Where is he? Inside?"

"You want reward, huh?"

"Hell, no! We ain't turnin' lawmen! We got our own reasons for wantin' him." The speaker dismounted, and went into Navajo Jack's house.

LARRY had his sixgun out. Why they had come was a mystery, but it was plain they were primed to kill. Navajo Jack knew it also. He took a step back toward the doorway. His shotgun muzzle came up.

"Vamos!" he ordered tonelessly.

What followed was so quick, so unexpected that even Navajo Jack was caught off-guard.

A gunshot crashed at the corner of the small hut. Navajo Jack staggered and fired the shotgun. The full charge of shot struck the dismounted man, spinning him back against his horse. He was dying as he fell.

The snorting horse bolted as Larry lunged into the doorway with his gun roaring a challenge. He winged the first man and knocked him out of the saddle with a second shot.

A bullet nicked Larry's ear. Another knocked splinters from the doorway beside him. The second man sagged in the saddle, spurred off to one side. Above the crashing roll of guns, Larry heard the sharper snap of a rifle at the corner of the hut.

And from there a fifth man lurched into view, staggering, weaving, falling. He had approached unnoticed from another quarter and had shot Navajo Jack. In turn he had been shot by someone else. Larry's gun clicked empty. The last rider yanked his horse around and galloped away. The wounded rider followed.

Larry ran out, caught up a hand gun from the nearest victim and emptied it after the retreating pair. They raced unscathed over a rise of ground and vanished.

Navajo Jack's squaw came running from the corner of the hut with a rifle. She dropped the gun and fell on her knees by Navajo Jack. Larry learned then that Indians could be torn by emotion. The little Yaqui squaw was whimpering as she cradled her husband's head and shoulders

—whimpering, pleading in Indian gutturals.

"Let's have a look," Larry said, kneeling beside her.

A bullet had plowed into Navajo Jack's shoulder and shattered the collar bone; moving up, it had clipped a chunk out of the jaw bone, knocking Navajo Jack unconscious. Both places were bleeding freely.

"Help me get him inside."

She knew little English but she understood that. Calm, steady once more, she helped carry the limp figure inside. Dry-eyed, expressionless, she got clean rags, water and opened little clothwrapped bundles of herbs. That was Indian savvy, better sometimes than a white doctor's efforts. Larry left her there and went outside to reconnoiter.

The two escaping riders had evidently kept going. Two of the men on the ground were dead. The third, shot by Navajo Jack's squaw was dying, with bloody froth on his lips. The rifle bullet had torn a big hole through his chest. His eyes were already closed.

Collecting guns and cartridge belts, Larry went back inside. Navajo Jack was still unconscious. Larry did what he could to help, and presently the herb dressing began to take effect. The bleeding slackened. Nearly an hour after he had been hit, Navajo Jack turned his head slightly and opened his eyes. Later, when he was washed, bandaged and smoking a cigarette, Navajo Jack spoke weakly.

"They come back. We go."

"In a few days," Larry nodded. "When you're better."

Navajo Jack rolled his eyes at his squaw, squatting before the fireplace with her pots and pans. "Is better all go now," he said.

If Navajo Jack thought there was that danger, there was. It was sheer madness, however, to move him. He was too weak. Nevertheless Navajo Jack spoke to his wife. Immediately she began to load a pack horse.

Larry helped her.

BY DARK they had eaten and were on their way. The squaw rode ahead, leading the pack horses. Navajo Jack followed, bowed over in the saddle. Larry rode at his stirrup, alert to help.

They traveled north through the badlands, through waterless county to foothills covered with scrub growth. Sometime after midnight, in the faint, clear starlight, they entered a wide, shallow draw that sloped upward for a long distance, ending abruptly in a sandstone cliff a hundred feet high.

The black mouth of a cave was barely visible. The squaw dismounted, led the pack horses inside. Navajo Jack had to be helped in. The squaw had lighted a pitch pine sliver that sputtered and flamed smokily, driving back the shadows in a spacious rock room. The floor was sand. The low entrance of a smaller chamber gaped at the back.

Debris on the floor, remains of several old fires against the side walls showed that the place had been used before. Larry investigated the back room. It was much damper. The sputtering pine flame in his hand revealed a deep pool of water in one corner—cold, clear water, sweet and good. Its presence made the place a natural fortress.

Reassured, Larry took the horses out into the night and staked them close. Before coming in, he stared long at a rising red glow in the far south. He carried the news to Navajo Jack.

"Looks like your place is on fire."

Tough as he was, the ride had about finished the Indian. His reply was a guttural whisper, but at that it had a twist of dry humor. "I savvy so. I like to see them burn this."

The little squaw crooned soothing words as she fussed over her man. The torches burned low. Navajo Jack asked for a smoke. Larry rolled him a cigarette, held a match. Navajo Jack smoked in silence, finally stirred, spoke slowly.

"I don't talk much. Close mouth best.

But you better know now, that concho—"

Larry cut in, "Take it easy. Tell me *manana*."

"*Quien sabe manana*—who know tomorrow? Maybe I'm dead," Navajo Jack said.

"I reckon not. Your number ain't on the cards this deal, Jack. It'd been up tonight already if it was."

Navajo Jack smiled faintly. In the flickering shadows, his eyes seemed to glow; shrewd eyes that had seen a lot and knew a lot that never passed his lips. But tonight he was talking. "That concho," his whispering voice stated, "she's like conchos on vest of Missouri Red."

"Who's he?"

"*Muy* bad hombre," said Navajo Jack.

"Never heard of him," Larry muttered. Not that it meant anything. The Woolly Rock district held many men who drifted in secretly and kept out of sight. "What's he got against me, Jack? Why should this Missouri Red want to kill me?"

"*Quien sabe?*" Navajo Jack said.

"Where's he apt to hang out when he's healthy?"

"Sunday School Wells," said Navajo Jack.

Larry whistled softly, considering. You couldn't find Sunday School Wells on the map. In fact you couldn't find Sunday School Wells at all unless you were cutting north of the Gila through one of the dry, god-forsaken stretches that were useless to man and beast.

In the morning Navajo Jack was stronger. After breakfast Larry said, "I'll drop back in a few days if everything goes all right. Want anything from Sunday School Wells?"

Navajo Jack grinned, which was unusual for him. "Bag sucker candy for squaw," he said. "Watch out for Missouri Red. He carry knife in shirt."

Larry left them with regret—a renegade Injun who knew how to be grateful, and a little squaw who liked sugar candy and was devoted to her man. Larry had a rifle and sixgun, plenty of cartridges, and a knife Navajo Jack had insisted he take. His horse was the one Sam Scoggins had given him. He carried an old water bottle and some strips of jerky.

He was less than five miles from the cave, riding through a small canyon, when half a dozen riders appeared ahead of him, led by the tall, spare, unmistakable figure of Sheriff Pete Blythe.

CHAPTER FOUR

Owlhoot Jail

THE man at Pete Blythe's right hand whipped up a rifle and fired a shot. Larry yanked his horse around as the bullet screamed close. The nearest turn in the canyon was a full hundred yards behind him. Pete Blythe wasn't out here with a posse for his health. And, as if the gunshot were a signal, a brace of answering shots echoed back in the canyon.

Larry swore under his breath. Pete Blythe's posse evidently had split up to block their man in the canyon.

Trapped, Larry hesitated, weighing his chance. The north canyon wall went up in a series of rocky ledges and steep, boulder-strewn slopes studded with scrubby pines and bushes. A horse could not get up that north slope, but a man, with luck might stand a chance, if he could dodge bullets fast enough.

Leaving the horse there, Larry took rifle and water bottle and ran for the first slope, the first rocks and bushes. The hammering reports of the posse guns echoed and re-echoed between the canyon walls. Bullets screamed and whined close as he scrambled into the doubtful shelter of the first bushes. There he stared for a moment in astonishment. Pete Blythe and three of his men were galloping away.

The rest of the posse was bursting around the canyon turn—five—six—eight riders.

Larry pumped a shot at them and had the good luck to hit a horse. It stumbled and fell, and the rider went off in a sprawling fall. Four of the men dismounted and hunted cover among the rocks. Three of them retraced their way at a gallop.

Bullets began to slap and spat against the rocks as Larry worked upward, keeping out of sight as much as possible. He had to make it in short rushes, crawling, scrambling, wriggling over the ground.

He was sweating and panting before he covered a quarter of the distance. A bullet richocheted off a boulder beside his head and half-blinded one eye with rock dust. Another went through his hat. A third punctured his water bottle.

Larry rolled over on his back and let the water run into his mouth and over his face. If he got out of this alive, he'd need that water. If he got out! Even when he made it over the canyon rim, safe from the guns below, Larry knew he didn't have much chance.

He was afoot now against a mounted posse. And Pete Blythe and his men were galloping along the canyon rim toward him. They saw him, and dismounted, and started to dodge forward on foot, shooting as they came.

The scrubby pine growth was not much cover. But the ground was uneven and rocky. Larry got some cover behind a low, rocky dyke which zigzagged some fifty yards or so back from the canyon rim.

A familiar voice, Jess Parker's voice, yelled: "All right, Blythe—there's your man! Go get him like you claimed you would."

They had scattered out, fan-shaped, and were working cautiously in toward the dyke. Larry went tense as old Pete's familiar voice called to him.

"I'm comin' after you, Larry! I want you to go back under arrest an' let the law handle this!"

"You know I wouldn't have a chance with a Malpai jury! Stay back! Don't make me shoot you!" Larry yelled. "Back, Pete."

And old Pete pleaded: "Larry, don't make me do this!"

Jess Parker yelled: "Go after him, damn it! You're the sheriff and you been tellin' what you'd do! There he is now!"

Pete's reply was not audible. It didn't matter. For Pete was coming like he'd come for other outlaws in the past, a grim old figure dodging forward, single-action Colts out and ready. A lump came in Larry's throat as he watched that gallant charge.

For Pete was half blind. Pete didn't have a chance. Pete knew it and knew Larry knew it. And yet he was asking no favors. Straight out, Pete was coming for his man, in the only code of ethics he knew.

THE second bunch of riders had ridden up out of the canyon too, and were coming up behind Larry. Beyond Pete the way was open to the horses. The men had fanned out, leaving Pete to cover that particular stretch of ground.

Larry knew he could get past Pete without much danger of getting shot. Pete's eyes were that bad. But if the old man missed such an easy target, Jess Parker would accuse him of doing it on purpose, or else find out about Pete's eyes.

Either thing would finish Pete as sheriff. And that would be the end of Pete himself. He'd have nothing else to go on for.

Larry ducked low behind the dyke and ran, crouching, to the end. Jess Parker was out that way, bellied down behind more rocks waiting for the shooting to start—Jess Parker, who wanted Pete's job.

Pete didn't even see Larry come around the end of the dyke, running hard. None of them did at first. They were watching the spot where Pete was due to tangle with the boy who'd been like his own son. Jess Parker was the first one to see. The surprise was so great Jess came up kneeling, firing a sixgun.

Larry couldn't stop to aim; the other men were off to the left, opening up, too.

Gun leaping and roaring in his hand, Larry threw lead at Jess Parker and kept going. Bullets filled the air around him. One of them nicked his leg. He was a good target. Jess Parker should have hit him. But Parker was rattled.

And suddenly Jess Parker wheeled, dropped his gun and went down out of sight behind the rocks. Larry had to pass between that spot and the other men. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Jess Parker flattening down out of sight. The other men were shooting wildly at him. Back beyond the dyke, the second bunch of men were riding hard, yelling encouragement. And ahead, not far ahead, the horses were standing.

Passing the first horse, Larry ran to a long-legged black he had often seen Jess Parker riding. The animal was powerful, fast; it snorted and bolted as Larry hit the saddle and spurred hard.

Larry headed away from the canyon toward country that was even rougher, toward the heart of badlands, toward desert, where the country was folded, contorted, twisted and eroded into a nightmarish landscape.

But the rougher the going, the better the protection. Two hours later Larry knew he had picked the best horse and had a chance of losing the posse. Raw, bare lava rock, black and hot under the glaring sun, blotted out his trail, and from then on he rode easier.

When night fell after the long, hard day, Larry was walking his horse. Thirst was sapping at man and beast. The night, held little comfort. The bright stars were cold and lonely. South, by Gila, Malpai had a noose ready for him. On the Busted Jug ranch, old Jughead Taylor's seething hate was a lasting thing. And Kareen—Kareen was worse than hating. Kareen was dead to all that had passed between them.

Two scrubby cottonwoods stood on the parched, bare flats at Sunday School Wells. A jumble of old adobe houses, some of them roofless and gaping, stood around Friar Tucker's Sunday School store.

Friar Tucker, the big, convivial owner of the store—and most of Sunday School Wells, for that matter—would sell you guns, ammunition, grub and clothes at fancy prices. He would take mail out to the nearest post office, for you, and get your mail in care of his store, under any name you fancied.

The latest gossip of the owlhoot was on tap at the Sunday School store, and the biggest collection of reward notices in the country was tacked on the walls. Your standing was apt to depend on the rewards offered for you.

Over Friar Tucker's long wooden counters, you could buy and sell wet cattle and horses, before or after they had been stolen. You could purchase a man's death as easily as you could buy a blind drunk. You could hire hard-eyed outlaws for any purpose for which you could pay.

But you could find no women, and Friar Tucker's high prices were cash to everyone. The jolly lord of Sunday School Wells had an aversion to women and never gave credit.

Larry had been to the Wells several times before. Tonight when he rode in among the clustered adobe huts to Friar Tucker's store, it seemed to him there were more men than usual at the Wells.

They were having a good time inside the low, sprawling adobe building which housed the store. Noisy talk, loud guffaws came out the open door. The voices of two men arguing loudly were audible in the high-walled back yard where the wells—the only water in a long day's ride—were safely closed in.

THE backyard gate was open. Larry rode in. The arguing men had gone inside. He watered his horse carefully and drank sparingly himself. The water put new life in him.

The back entrance to the store was a

hallway running past several rear rooms. Larry heard men talking in two of those rooms as he walked past. The big front room, part bar, part store, had tables on the floor and a solid mass of reward notices covering all the bar wall space. He was halfway across the room before he was noticed. Then a bearded man at one of the tables loudly exclaimed:

"My God'lmighty! Look who's here! Ol' man Blythe's deputy!"

Every man stopped what he was doing. Some reached instinctively for their guns. Larry backed up against the counter and eyed the room.

The two survivors of the fracas at Navajo Jack's were not present. Several of the men there Larry knew by sight. The rest were strangers. Taken as a whole they were a hard-bitten, desperate lot. He spoke to the bearded man who had recognized him. Ace Hayden was the name, a former Malpai man who had gone to California several years before.

"I used to be Blythe's deputy," Larry said. "Right now I'm on the dodge, Hayden. Do I need any more sign?"

A sly stranger with a ragged, tobacco-stained mustache, dropped one eye and said: "So you're the feller who killed his side-kick?"

And a third man, squatty, long-armed and powerful, sneered truculently. "So you took the posse after the boys who collected from the Malpai bank an' then got away with the money yourself?"

"Got any proof to back up that lie?" Larry answered him curtly.

"Proof hell! You're dodgin' your own sheriff, ain't you? Are you callin' me a liar?"

Men stepped hastily out of the line of argument. With his back to the bar, Larry waited. Soft words did a man no good in a crowd like this. Into the cold taut silence boomed the cheerful voice of Friar Tucker.

"Drink on the house, boys! Bank money don't matter none tonight. Show the young feller hard luck ain't held against him here."

A hearty yell answered that offer. "Judgment day's a-comin'! Tucker givin' free drinks! How come you couldn't trust me a little while ago, Tucker, seein' you can loosen up now?"

Friar Tucker was a tall, paunchy, bald-headed man whose beaming face belied his cold, blue eyes. Now his fat middle shook as he chuckled. "You boys die off too sudden when a posse catches you. I don't have a chance to collect. This is stranger's welcome."

Laughter greeted that. Larry took his drink with the rest. He needed it. His guard did not relax. Free drinks were not making some of the men any friendlier.

He looked for a man with red hair who might fit the name of Missouri Red. No one in the room filled the bill. Friar Tucker spoke to him hospitably, "Stayin' around here long?"

A man guffawed. "Friar's already figurin' how much money the customer'll spend."

Larry said, "This seems to be as safe as any place."

"Safe?" Friar Tucker boomed as he deftly whisked the bottle from a liquored customer who wanted two drinks on the house. "You're safer here than you ever was in your cradle."

"Bueno!" Larry said. Next drinks are on me."

AT LEAST they were willing to drink up his money. While they were doing that, Larry lifted his voice.

"Some strangers rode over to Cow Springs yesterday to lift my hair. They didn't all get away. I like my hair. Navajo Jack an' me cleared out of Cow Springs at dark, an' later on somebody came back an' fired Navajo Jack's place. Anybody here know what it's all about?"

Some denied knowledge; some said nothing. Larry caught a few sidewise looks, as if a good many of the men knew something

he didn't. When no one semed disposed to tell him anything, he said: "I was mighty near shot up this morning by a posse from Malpai. They knew just about where to find me. Somebody carried word to Malpai where I could be found."

Silence greeted that. Then a tall, bearded man who had not spoken so far asked shortly; "You got any ideas about it yourself?"

"I'm not a mind reader," Larry said curtly.

"Maybe if you was, your health'd stay better," the speaker said.

Friar Tucker broke in again hopefully. "Who's buyin' next? Loosen up, boys! Your money won't do you no good after you're hung."

"Neither will you," he was rudely informed. "Stop harpin' on a hangin' noose. You spoil my liquor."

Watching, Larry had the growing feeling that something was going on under the surface. Something was being kept from him. Every man in the room was heavily armed. Many of them had come together here at Sunday School Wells.

He wondered if it had anything to do with the loot from the Malpai bank. Or with Bud Taylor's death? He couldn't see how. These men also seemed to think he had killed Bud and cached the money. But they knew about that fracas at Navajo Jack's. More than one of them probably knew just how Pete Blythe had known where to find Larry. But they weren't telling. It was to be kept a mystery.

Larry was pouring another drink when a newcomer entered from the back and spoke loudly. "Everybody ready to ride? Where's Jess Parker?"

"Parker ain't here, Red," he was told.

"His horse is tied out back. I lit a match and read the brand. It's Jess' saddle, too, with his initials burnt in it."

Eyes turned to Larry. Glass in hand, he grinned at them. "Parker was in the posse that jumped me this morning," he said. "I got away on his horse."

"Red," they had called the newcomer, who, in fact, did have red hair. His sandy face was wide in the cheekbones, running down to a smallish, sharp chin, which gave him a fox-like look. So this was Missouri Red—not the big man Larry had expected to find. Missouri Red was a smallish man, wiry enough, but short, unimposing.

He had stopped, listened intently while Larry spoke. Now he edged forward, like a sidling fox. "So you got Jess Parker's horse?"

"I said so."

Missouri Red limped noticeably, as if a bullet might have hit his leg not so long before. He wore a calf-skin vest decorated down the front with a row of silver concho buttons. One of the buttons was missing.

They had not been close enough that day on the Salada road to recognize faces. Missouri Red proved it now by asking, "Who the hell are you?"

He had been waiting on the Salada road for a man he had never seen. Why? "The name is Remington," Larry said.

Missouri Red stared at him. When he spoke, it was softly. "What are you doing here?"

"Minding my own business," Larry said calmly.

Missouri Red grinned. He seemed in sudden good humor. "Mindin' your own business is the safest thing to do around here," he said, and was still speaking as his hand slapped to his gun.

Larry's intense watching had caught the start of that draw. His own draw was a shade faster. Men were still diving out of the way as his gun shattered the peace of the room. The gun just clearing Missouri Red's holster spun to the floor. Stunned, Missouri stood there, moving his arm awkwardly, as if he had no control over it for the moment.

Then he began to curse in high-pitched, shrill fury. "You've had the luck of the devil so far! But it's run out now!"

"Who's run it out?" Larry asked, watching the other men. The thing had been so unexpected he was still startled himself. Missouri Red was going to get help. That was plain. But who was going to be first? No man was drawing a gun. They all seemed spellbound.

Behind Larry, Friar Tucker spoke sadly "This is a hell of a welcome to give a stranger. Hold still, Remington, or I'll have to blow you from here to there."

Larry felt a double-barreled shotgun nuzzling into his back. He lifted his hands. The man standing next to him reached over and took his gun. The tension in the room relaxed.

Missouri Red had been rubbing his numb arm. He snarled at Friar Tucker, "Why didn't you shoot him?"

"I ain't a butcher," said Friar Tucker indignantly. "It'd be wasting good money anyway. That Malpai bank money now."

"Damn you—what's that to you?" Missouri Red limped to his gun, picked it up with his left hand and snarled, "Well, let's get rid of this rannie before we leave."

Larry had the cold, detached feeling he always got in a tight corner. But his mind was racing. Why wasn't Missouri Red interested in the money from the Malpai bank? Why? The man knew what had happened to the money. That meant he knew who had killed Bud Taylor.

"You won't get the bank money by fillin' him full of lead," Friar Tucker protested anxiously.

He was backed up.

"He's right, boys. What's the use of killin' the goose if he's got a good egg hid away?"

Missouri Red snarled: "He ain't got any money hidden away!"

"Maybe you know something about it," Larry challenged.

And Friar Trucker said: "You boys was all set to ride outa here. Leave him here with me. He'll be on tap when you get back."

The missing loot from the Malpai bank did the trick. Missouri Red was against it, but what little authority he seemed to have crumbled before that lure.

"I'll lock him up in the hog pen," Friar Tucker stated. "He'll be sittin' there safe when you all get back."

THE hog pen proved to be a windowless room in a back corner of the building, fitted with a door of iron bars. At any other time it would have been a joke—Sunday School Wells, outlaw headquarters, with a private jail of its own. Men crowded into the passage to see Larry locked up. Friar Tucker elaborately put the key into his pocket. Then they returned to the bar for a final round of drinks.

Before long Larry heard them straggling out into the back yard. Once started they were quickly gone in a drumming roll of hoofs and a few shrill yells.

Some voices still drifted back from the bar. They presently died away. Larry heard doors slamming. Then steps came back along the passage.

Friar Tucker stopped before the barred door and set a lantern onto the floor. In the dim light and shifting shadows he loomed big plump and jolly once more.

"Now then," he said, "I reckon we can get down to business."

"Maybe. Where'd that bunch head for?"

"I don't ask questions, an' the boys don't tell me anything," Friar Tucker replied smoothly.

He was lying, but that didn't matter. "Who's this Missouri Red?" Larry questioned.

"Came in from California with Ace Hayden. Never mind that. Let's talk about this here missing money. I had to peel you away from your guns awhile ago. But now that we're alone," said Friar Tucker expansively, "you'll find me different."

"That's mighty fine," said Larry. "Unlock this door, an' let's talk."

"As I was sayin'," Friar Tucker went

on, without making a move toward the door, "you're in a fix. When the boys get back, Missouri Red'll kill you. He's that kind. Packs a long memory, he does. Now if you could see your way clear about that bank money, maybe somethin' could be cooked up. The boys might not like it, but I can handle 'em."

"How about something to eat first?"

"Sure, right away. A man feels better when his belly's full. I'll get you some grub."

Tucker was as good as his word. He returned with cold meat and bread on a plate, and a tin cup of steaming black coffee. There was a small square opening in the bars for just that sort of thing.

"Gimme the coffee first," Larry begged.

Tucker passed it through. The tin cup was hot. Larry took a gulp of the scalding coffee and reached for the plate. Tucker shoved through. The light was poor. Before Tucker had any idea what was happening, the scalding coffee hit him in the eyes, and his wrist was grabbed and yanked through the opening.

CHAPTER FIVE

Back to the Broken Jug

TUCKER'S yell of pain met the rattle of the barrel door as he was jerked against it. Using the bottom of the opening for a fulcrum, Larry twisted the arm. Tucker squawled with the pain. He had no gun. His greater size and weight were no good to him now.

"My God, you're breakin' my arm! My eyes is scalded out!"

"Gentle down then!" Larry gritted. "Get out your key and unlock this door!"

Groaning, Friar Tucker groped into his pocket, found the key, blinked through the coffee, and got the key into the lock with an effort. "Who else is inside?" Larry asked.

"No one! I run 'em out an' close up. Ouch! Easy! You're breakin' it, I tell you!"

"I've got a kind heart like you," Larry said. "Where did Missouri Red take that bunch of border jumpers?"

Tucker only groaned.

But a little pressure on the arm made him gasp, "I'll tellin' you as fast as I can! Someone said they was goin' to the P Bar Three ranch, an' then on to the Busted Jug!"

"What for?"

"They're gonna clean out some cattle."

"They are, are they? Pete Blythe won't stand for anything like that."

"He won't be sheriff long. An' that's all I know," Tucker groaned as he crowded helpless against the bars, stooping slightly to the twist of his arm.

"Who carried word into Malpai about me?" Larry demanded.

"I don't know," A harder twist got an answer. "Red sent it, I reckon."

"What for?"

"God 'lmighty, I don't know! If you bust my arm, I still won't know!"

"Well then, who killed Bud Taylor?"

"They say you done it," Tucker groaned, and that seemed to be the truth as Tucker knew it.

"Step back," Larry ordered. Holding the arm, he pushed the door open and stepped out into the passage. He had to let go of the arm then. Tucker yanked it back through the door and jumped at him, swearing thickly. Larry smashed him in the nose and jumped back.

Blood spurted from Tucker's nose. Tucker went berserk then and rushed without caution. A slamming uppercut knocked him against the side wall. He bounced back, rushed again, swinging wildly.

They battled along the passage, staggering from one wall to the other. And it didn't matter that Tucker's arm was still strained, clumsy, that the hot coffee hadn't helped his eyes any. He was the bigger man. He had more height, weight, reach, and fury drove him in and in.

Lary kept moving back, fighting mostly with one arm. If Tucker got him down, he wouldn't stand much chance. But there was another side to it, a side Tucker wouldn't have understood if he had been told. Pete Blythe's side.

Old Pete, half-blind, carrying on as sheriff with gallant stubborness, was up against a lot he didn't suspect. Pete needed help now, and only one man could help him. Larry knew he had to help Pete, no matter what came of it. Only he could do it—and it was little enough return for all Pete had done for him—even if a hanging noose made up the reward.

Tending bar, drinking, eating heavily, didn't help a man much in a slamming, rough and tumble fight. Tucker began to pant, to gasp, to move sluggishly.

They were in the store part now. Tucker threw a big fist straight out. Larry ducked under and came up with a hooking smash to the jaw that knocked the bigger man sprawling into a table.

Tucker stumbled, upset a chair, fell down to his hands and knees. Larry could have kicked him. He waited until Tucker came up, sobbing for breath through pulped, bleeding lips, and knocked him down again. Tucker stayed there.

"Get up!" Larry panted.

But Tucker had had enough. Larry swung over behind the bar, found his gun belt and gun under the bar where Tucker had put them. Navajo Jack's knife was there also. His rifle was gone, but Tucker's sawed-off shotgun was there, and a box of shells beside it.

Stuffing the shells into his pockets, Larry went out to meet Tucker, who had reeled to his feet, wiping blood from his face.

"I want some more grub an' coffee," Larry told him. "An' then the best horse you've got."

Tucker got the grub in a dirty kitchen; then, carying the lantern, led the way out back to a small, open-front shed where several horses were tied. He transferred the saddle laboriously to one of the horses.

"Now crawl back in your den, you sanctimonious skunk," Larry directed.

Tucker left. By the time he closed the back door, Larry was riding out of the walled yard, toward the bleak emptiness of the desert flats.

THE stars were still bright and cold, as they had been earlier in the evening. The empty night was just as lonely. Larry was dead-beat, in no shape for a long ride, but he felt cheerful. The chance to help Pete brought its own strength.

Nevertheless, at sunrise, Larry was bleary-eyed, haggard, yawning and about at the end of his rope when he came out of the breaks, down through the purple sage to Jughead Taylor's bunch-grass range.

The early morning sunlight was flooding golden and warm about him when he reached the ranch house. A man at the corrals stared at him and started for the bunk house. Larry climbed stiffly out of the saddle at the back door and knocked.

Kareen came to the door. Color left her cheeks when she looked out at him. Indignation followed. "What are you doing here again?" she asked, poised to close the door.

"Where's your father?" Larry asked. Kareen was small and slender, but her bitter aversion had a flare beyond her size.

"You've done enough! Can't you let us alone? Mitch says you wounded his brother Jess yesterday! Isn't there any end to the trouble you're bringing?"

They faced one another like two strangers—all the hope and tenderness of the past buried, lost.

Larry answered her woodenly. "There'll be no shootin' unless he starts it. I came here to help him."

"Help him?" said Kareen. Her laugh had a shade of hysteria. "You help him?"

"Where's your father, Kareen?"

"Coming behind you!" Kareen threw at him, and stepped out of the doorway.

Jughead Taylor was striding from the

bunkhouse, big and massive as ever, formidable behind his black beard and fierce hooked nose. He carried a rifle with the muzzle forward, finger on the trigger; and he was sided by two of his men with hand guns out.

"Drop that shotgun, Remington!" Jughead's order was harsh, threatening. "Kareen, get into the house!"

Twenty-four hours of riding had left Larry raw-nerved, irritable. "If I was honin' for trouble," Larry snapped, "I wouldn't ride up in the open for you to throw down on me! I just come from Friar Tucker's place at Sunday School Wells. A man named Missouri Red left there last night with a bunch of riders. They were headin' for the Parker ranch and your outfit. They're after cattle. By the number of men, the bunch they'll take won't be small—an' it'll be your cattle they'll get."

"A pretty story," Jughead scoffed. "My cattle has been left pretty much alone for years."

"You've crowded the outlaw bunch harder than anyone else but Pete Blythe," Larry said. "Your stock is nearest to 'em. They've marked you down for trouble, an' you're goin' to get it."

"The one thing right now is that I've got you," said Jughead with grim satisfaction.

"I'm headin' into Malpai," Larry said. "I don't aim to be stopped, Jughead."

"Now ain't that funny? Malpai is right where we're takin' you. I promised my women folks I'd let the law have its way with you, but I'll see that the law gets its chance."

"If you go to Malpai, you'll follow me in like a stranger," Larry said coolly. "I've run out my rope on all this, you onery old mossy-horn. I didn't shoot Bud, but I'll prove it my own way, not before a Malpai jury, with the cards stacked agin' me. Savvy?"

"Just so we get you into Malpai! If a jury don't fix you, I will! Ed, get the hosses saddled."

Then Kareen cut in. "Larry are you hungry?" she asked.

Jughead grunted angrily.

"I'd feed a hungry dog," Kareen said defensively.

Larry was scanning her face. They had been too close to each other not to read the little signs. Kareen suddenly had become less bitter. Her eyes were troubled now as they watched him.

His faint smile was twisted. "Even a dog gets hungry," Larry said. "I could use some coffee, Kareen, an' bless you for thinkin' of it."

Jughead muttered angrily in his beard. Color was in Kareen's cheeks as she went into the house. Bacon, eggs and coffee she got for him, and Jughead stood grim and watchful in the kitchen, while Larry hastily ate, and stood up again.

"Thanks," he said to Kareen.

Kareen said nothing. The troubled look was still on her face.

They rode away from the ranch, four of them. It was mid-morning when they entered Malpai and rode toward the small brick courthouse where Pete Blythe had his office. They were recognized. Excitement went toward the courthouse with them. On foot and in the saddle, a growing crowd accompanied them. When Larry dismounted at the courthouse hitch-rack, an angry voice yelled: "First time I ever see a prisoner come in with his gun!"

THE crowd trooped into the courthouse after them. The sheriff's door was open. Pete Blythe was just getting up from his desk when Larry walked in and said, "Hello, Pete."

"Where'd you come from, Larry?" Pete jerked out, staring.

Yes, Pete was getting old. Never before had it shown so plainly. Tall, erect, his face heavily weathered and his hair snowy white, Pete was still a fine figure of a man. But his face was deeply seamed, and he had aged a lot in the past week.

Before Larry could answer, Jughead Taylor cut in. "He come to my place this mornin', Pete. I brought him in. Lock him up an' make double-damned sure he don't escape. He's gonna pay for what he did to Bud if it's the last thing I do in this life."

In the crowded doorway, an angry voice burst out: "He oughta be hung right off!"

An excited murmur of agreement ran through the crowd. Pete Blythe hunched his spare shoulders and faced the scowling leaders who had pushed on into the office.

"There'll be no lynchin' in Malpai," Pete barked angrily. "The boy'll go to trial the same as any other prisoner."

"No one ever figgered you'd do anything but try to help him, Pete," another man sneered.

"Who said that?" Pete flung out in sudden passion.

"Me. Ben Casey! What's the matter with your eyes? I'm standin' right here!"

Pete passed the back of his hand across his eyes, and then glared at Casey, who was standing in the second row of speakers.

"Nothin's the matter with my eyes, Casey! An' I'm sheriff here! Sabe? There'll be no lynchin' in Malpai! Get outa here!"

Casey was a crony of the Parkers. He sneered now and spoke to the men around him.

"They lived together. Remington was his deputy. If you don't lynch the dirty dog now, how much chance do you reckon there'll be of anything happenin' to him while Blythe's got the handlin' of it? Take it outa his hands! Get your justice while you got the chance!"

The angry murmurs broke into loud bursts of agreement.

"Lynchin's the thing for him! Who's got a rope?"

"Bring him outa there!" a yell from the corridor begged.

"A hangin'll settle all this! He didn't give Bud time to wait for trial!"

Even Jughead Taylor stood darkly to one side and looked his agreement with the idea. Like flame through dry grass, the idea flared and grew in seconds, until the crowd out in the corridor was roaring, and the leaders were being shoved forward.

Pete drew his gun, stepped in front of Larry and shouted, "Get back, damn you!"

But the leaders still were being pushed forward. Hands were already on guns, waiting for the final spark that would start violence.

Larry stepped to Pete's side and faced them. And there was grinning death in his haggard, bleary-eyed face, cold menace about the shotgun he held. It stopped the forward push, silenced the men who could see it. "Hang me, will you?" Larry said to the sullen, angry men he faced. "Who'll hang me? Who's the first son to step up an' try it?"

Faced with that question, no man volunteered or drew his gun.

"I'm saying the same thing!" Pete Blythe snarled. "I'm openin' the pot with five cartridges! Who calls the bet?"

Jughead Taylor suddenly erupted in a bellow. "I can see how the wind's blowin'! Still lookin' out for him, ain't you, Blythe? By God, a hangin's is the only way to settle this after all! Boys, I'm with you!"

Men out in the corridor heard that, and cheered and pushed forward. But the men inside the doorway, who faced Pete's battered old forty-five and the double-barreled shotgun, held back, hands off their guns. They knew men would die if the lynching started now. More than one man would die. And none of them was willing to be the first.

CHAPTER SIX

Rustler Paradise

LARRY'S lip curled. "You want a lynchin', but you don't want to fight for it, huh? Get out, all of you! If one of you makes a move, I'll cut loose!

Who's hankerin' for buckshot in the belly? You, Stevens? You, Edgcomb?"

Stevens, Edgcomb and the men to the right and left of them, edged back. They knew death when they saw it.

"You too, Jughead!" Pete Blythe rasped. "I've knowed you for nigh on thirty years, but, by God, you'll be a dead man if you lift a hand in here!"

Bristling with rage, Jughead Taylor moved toward the door also. His voice shook. "They're skunks, boys! Don't get yoreselves shot up in here! There's other ways!"

Those inside the doorway had a hard time getting out into the crowded hall. Step by step, Larry followed them to the door, gun in hand. Pete kept at his side. Larry slammed the door, shot the bolt, jumped aside, pushing Pete with him, just as a roaring blast of shots tore through the door, just missing them.

Shouts, cries, feet scuffling and tramping outside the door were drowned out as other guns cut loose, seiving the door with lead.

Pete Blythe backed aside, gun ready to answer the fire. Grief and concern were drawing Pete's wrinkled face into a sorrowful, though grim, mask.

The lynch-maddened bunch beyond the door were Pete's neighbors, friends. He hated to shoot back through the door, where he couldn't miss in the crowd.

Pete's voice was loaded with grief. "Why'd you have to come back here, Larry? Whyn't you hit across the border? You knew I'd have to do my duty."

"I rode all night from Sunday School Wells, Pete. The outlaw bunch are raidin' the Busted Jug today or tonight. Jughead is too stubborn a fool to believe it. All he can think about is gettin' my neck in a rope."

"You went to Sunday School Wells yesterday, an' then rode back here?"

"That's right."

"Why'd you ride here with that story, Larry, after . . . after . . ." Pete's voice went shaky, broke off. He faltered on the accusation of Bud Taylor's murder. He gulped and said, "Why'd you get Bud, Larry? There was a reason beside the money, wasn't there? Bud done somethin'. You had to kill him straight out, for a good reason, didn't you?"

"I didn't kill him, Pete."

"But that tally book. I got it here in my desk. A dyin' man don't write a thing like that unless it's true."

"Pete, did I ever lie to you?"

"You never did, Larry. You was like our own boy. God, I was proud of you. So was Ma before she died. It's mighty near killed me havin' to go out an' hunt you with a gun. I . . . I kept seein' you like you was the day you straggled in from Yuma, ragged an' hungry an' mighty lonesome." They were back in the corner of the office, where the crashing, smashing gunfire through the door couldn't reach them. Window glass was breaking, falling to the floor. Larry had to raise his voice to make himself heard.

"You'll have to trust me, Pete. Get me Bud's tally book. I'm leavin' you. I'm half dead for a sleep, but I've got some ridin' in me yet. If I get away from here, come along with whoever follows me."

"You can't get away from here, Larry."

"I'll get hung if I stay here, an' you'll have a lot of trouble that'll probably ruin you. I come back to help you, Pete. I didn't figure on all this, but there's still a chance. Let me have Bud's tally book. You lay low around the office here. They ain't apt to hurt you for doin' your duty."

Pete peered searchingly with his failing eyes, and then, careless of the occasional bullet slamming into the desk, he opened the top drawer, and came back with a small, dog-eared notebook. Larry shoved it into his pocket, clapped Pete's shoulder, and opened the door behind them.

Winding steps went down to the courthouse basement where the jail cells were. The passage in front of the cells ended in

a back basement door, barred and kept locked by a padlock.

Larry still had his keys. He opened the door cautiously. The short flight of steps up to the ground level was clear. The crowd was at the front and side of the courthouse.

A look, as his head came level with the ground, showed two saddled horses and a horse and buggy at the hitchrack under the cottonwoods behind the courthouse. They had been there when he rode up. No one had thought to move them.

Four men were standing at the west corner of the courthouse, not thirty feet away, looking toward the front, toward the windows of Pete's office. Four men, thirty feet away. Two saddled horses fifty feet away. . . .

ONE man turned, saw Larry bursting up the steps, shotgun in hand. The man's yell of warning and quick jump to the corner of the building brought the other three whirling around.

"Jump, or I'll cut you down!" Larry threw at them.

They dove around the corner of the courthouse, guns forgotten. But when Larry reached the hitchrack and made a flying mount to a sorrel horse, men were already scattering out and firing at him. The sorrel horse shied as Larry opened up with the shotgun, firing high, on purpose.

But the blast of small shot drove the gunmen back out of sight for the moment.

Larry yanked the sorrel's head around and broke with a rush out from under the tall cottonwoods, west toward the rolling range beyond Malpai, west toward the Bottle Neck ford of the Gila, which would save him running the gauntlet of town to the river bridge.

They stormed after him, gunning him out of town, quirting their horses hard. Water splashed high at the river ford as the sorrel fought across. Guns opened up across the river as Larry spurred up the gravelly rise of the opposite bank. A bullet ripped off the heel of his right boot, and another whipped through the crown of his hat. . . .

He'd had had the good luck of the devil so far. Then a bullet struck his leg half way above the knee. Blood gushed as the sorrel carried him over the crest, out of sight.

Using his bandanna on the wound, Larry drove the sorrel on. It seemed he'd been riding other men's horses forever—walking, trotting, loping, galloping through badlands and range land, doomed, damned and driven on by the spectral finger of Bud Taylor pointing back from the grave. Hell could be no worse.

The foaming, sweat-streaked sorrel was about done for when it finally plunged down a draw toward the grassy flat where clustered the P Bar Three buildings and corrals.

The corrals were empty. At a distance the place looked deserted. Larry had hoped to find the corrals filled, the place alive with Missouri Red and his gun-slingers from Sunday School Wells, resting up from the night's ride before they got down to business with Jughead Taylor's cattle.

One sign of life greeted him. A lone rider coming up the draw toward him stopped, reined half around, as if ready to run for it. Larry's breath sucked in as he recognized the rider. It was Kareen Taylor.

The sorrel stumbled as they met. Head down, it trembled, wind whistling through flaring nostrils. Karen's hair was in windblown tendrils. Challenge, mixed with fear, was on her face. Swift concern appeared when she saw the blood soaked leg.

"What is it, Larry? Where's father?" She almost could have cried. "Is he alive? Did you kill him?" For that was in her mind.

"He's coming behind me," Larry croaked. "Where's the Parkers? What are you doing here?"

"They're gone. Mitch just drove away. Pablo Morales' horse came to the corral

this morning with blood on the empty saddle. Pablo was riding the line over by the Dry Creek breaks and Dry Creek canyon. I came over here to help."

"Where'd Mitch go?"

"He went after some of his men. They're going on to look for Pablo. You're hurt, Larry! What happened?"

"I want your horse," Larry said hoarsely. He didn't know bloody fingers had smudged his face; didn't know weakness and strain made his grin ghastly as he said: "I cheated 'em again. Run out from the hangin' noose they had ready. They're comin' behind me."

Kareen was already swinging out of the saddle. She sided her horse by his good leg, head to his horse's tail, and stepped between and turned the stirrup for him.

"You deserve a fair trial, Larry. They can't do that to you."

He barely managed to get across into the other saddle, taking the shotgun. Panting with weakness, he gathered up the reins and grinned. "It won't make much difference after you're married to Mitch Parker."

Back at the head of the long draw, the first of the pursuit burst into view. Larry delayed for a moment, looking down at Kareen. The harshness went out of his voice.

"I reckon I won't see you again, Kareen. They'll get me. While I've got the chance, I'll tell you I never stopped lovin' you. How could I have hurt Bud, knowin' it would hurt you? No matter what they think they've proved after I'm gone, just hang onto that when you think about me."

The girl moved as though to show him that she believed him, that she still loved him. Then her pride and her sorrow came over her again and she drew back. Larry was holding onto the horn of his saddle as he looked down on her, and could now hear the pounding of the men following. He couldn't wait any longer though he felt that he should say something more. He smiled briefly, sorrowfully, and rolled his spurs, leaving her behind him.

THE horse bolted ahead as the spurs struck it. Fresher, faster the drumming rush of its gallop swept up the side of the draw to the brush, where bullets would not find so clear a target.

Looking back, Larry saw Kareen on the sorrel. She was leaning forward a little, oblivious to the gunfire behind her as she watched him go. Then the brush cut her off, and Larry put her out of his mind. Thinking only made it worse.

The Dry Creek breaks tongued down into the flatter grazing country in a series of ridges and hills, gullied and eroded, bare and bleak, so rough for miles that a man on horseback did well to get through them.

Dry Creek canyon, on the eastern edge of the breaks, cut through the first and highest hills, and formed a pathway through the worst of the going. If Pablo Morales had been killed while working the Busted Jug line near the canyon, then trouble was stirring by the canyon.

Kareen's fresher horse outdistanced the Malpai men. Bearing southwest, Larry entered the breaks south of Dry Creek canyon. He was trying to reach the west end of the canyon by skirting around through the rough country where no one was apt to sight him.

The going was cruel and hard, through winding arroyos, up steep slopes, plunging down other slopes. It was true badlands country, killing for man and beast.

He had to look twice when he first saw far ahead a thin, drifting cloud of dust that marked some kind of activity at the west end of Dry Creek canyon.

Mostly Dry Creek ran underground, except after a rain. Here and there in the channel the water worked up in scant pools. One such spot was at the west end of the canyon. There too, beside the water, a steep-walled pocket enclosed nine or ten acres of bare ground. It was a natural corral, too steep-sided for a cow or horse to get up, almost too steep for a man to climb.

Dust was drifting up from that pocket

as Larry rode near through the breaks. The bawling of uneasy cattle came on the wind.

He rode near the rim of the pocket, stopping as soon as he could see down to the milling cattle which had been thrown in through the one narrow entrance. While he looked, another bunch of a dozen or so head were hazed in by riders at the south of the pocket.

They were clearing the beef off Jughead Taylor's land, pointing it through the canyon as fast as it appeared at the other end, holding everything here by water until the whole lot was ready to travel.

Half a dozen riders were at the mouth of the pocket. Circling the rim, Larry reached a spot where he could look down a steep slope into the canyon proper at the pocket entrance.

Mitch Parker was down there, talking to Jess Parker and Missouri Red. One of the outlaw bunch and two of the Parker riders were watching the mouth of the pocket. Two more men up in the canyon were hazing another bunch of beef toward the spot.

Larry swiped the back of his hand across his eyes. The hand was trembling. His blood-caked leg was a thing of fire, his brain seemed to be blazing.

Behind him, not far behind, the Malpai men were coming. Now and then topping a higher rise he had seen their dust far back and caught glimpses of the riders themselves. Like a hunting pack they were keeping his trail.

Down there at the bottom of the slope, was the answer to all his trouble. Larry couldn't know what would come of him if he carried out his plan. Yet now he had no other choice. Any hope of ever seeing Kareen again, of even living more than a few hours, lay in what might happen in the next few minutes. Behind him was certain death. Ahead of him death was hardly less sure. But with luck he might make out. And even if he failed he would be paid off in boot-

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hill. The posse was sure to follow him. That's all he wanted at this moment.

He put the horse to the canyon edge, grabbed the saddle horn and hung on. The horse did not want to go over. Larry gigged him with the spurs. Then the gallant little beast surged forward, bunched his hoofs, and started that wild slide downwards.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Noose for a Rustler

BY A MIRACLE the little horse made it, plunging to the bottom in a cascade of flying gravel and dust. The men below drew guns when he appeared above. By the dumfounded looks on their faces when he drew up before them, he saw that Kareen had said nothing to Mitch Parker about his visit to the Busted Jug.

Jess Parker's harsh voice was the first to rise above the bawling cattle in the pocket. He spoke to Missouri Red. "You said, by God, he was locked up at the Wells!"

Missouri Red's fox-like face was haggard too. He'd ridden all night, worked all day. He answered hotly and irritably.

"He musta shot himself out. Look at the blood on his leg. It don't matter how he got here. I'm glad he's here. I got a score to even with him."

Glaring, sixgun resting ready across his saddle roll, Mitch Parker barked: "What the hell's he doin' here?"

Jess Parker made an impatient gesture. "We got him now. Don't worry."

Larry showed his teeth in a savage grin. "So you're comin' out in the open with it? No dry-gulchin' like Missouri Red tried. No sendin' a bunch of killers to drag me outa an Indian's shack on a thin excuse. You got me, but why in hell did you want me in the first place?" he asked.

Mitch Parker laughed. "With you out of the way, we'll cook Pete Blythe's goose quick. That old fool is done an' don't know

it. Jess has as good as got the job already. We'll run things in these parts when Jess is sheriff. We'll—"

"Shut up, Mitch!" Jess Parker barked. "What's this talk about a bunch tryin' to drag you out of an Indian's shack?"

"Don't know about that, huh?" Larry laughed. "Ask Missouri Red then. He didn't show himself, but then he kept out of sight too, when he bushwhacked me on the Salado road. Where's the concho off your vest, Red?"

"What's it to you? I lost it."

"I picked it up where the dirty son hid on the Salado road an' gunned me."

Missouri Red blinked, shrugged, and then turned to Jess Parker. "Some of the boys went over to Cow Springs to get him an' find out where he hid that bank money."

Jess Parker swore. "Damn you, I told yuh to forget about that bank money. It's him I wanted, not the bank money. Soon as we get old Blythe outa the way, there'll be plenty of money for the takin'."

Larry's laugh had a savage edge. "I can read the sign now. Which one of you Parkers killed Bud Taylor an' tore out the last page of writing in his tally book an' wrote on the page? Red, they've been lyin' to you. I didn't kill Bud Taylor. I didn't get the money. If you was due a share of it, you got cheated."

Missouri Red's fox-like face twisted in a snarl. "You mean you got that money, Jess? You lied to me all along about it?"

"Are you believin' him?"

"Damned if I'm not!" Missouri Red spat. "It sounds like your smooth thinkin'. Your idea of raidin' the bank was good. When Mitch high-tailed into the Wells an' said you wanted Remington killed on his way back to Malpai, I took some of the boys myself an' covered all ways he was likely to come back. I got plugged in that deal myself—an' it was only to cover up your grab of the money huh? You think I'll take a dirty trick like that lying down?"

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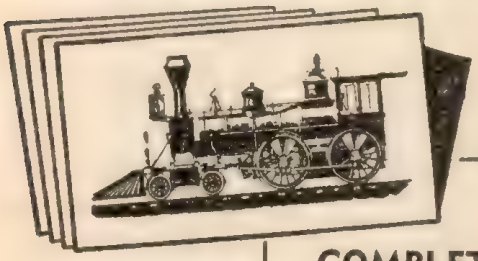

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Eyes narrowed, gun out, Missouri Red had become a loud yell.

"Don't get hasty, Red," Jess Parker warned angrily. "When Mitch told me he found Bud Taylor an' the money, an' got it, an' laid it on Remington in Bud's tally book, I seen the first thing to do was to get Remington outa the way quick. Then there'd be no argument about it. If you'd got this fellow on the Salado road that day, you'd of had your share of the money. It's waitin' at the ranch house for you now!"

"When a man lies to me once, everything he says from then is a lie!" Red snarled.

"What are you gonna do about it?" Jess Parker challenged.

Missouri Red's gun muzzle flicked up, crashing his raging reply. Mitch Parker's shot was too late to stop the bullet that smashed into his brother. But Mitch's .45 sent Missouri Red reeling. A second shot sent the fox-faced little outlaw plunging out of the saddle to the ground.

"Drop your gun, Mitch!" Larry grated.

Cursing, Mitch balanced life and death in one split second, and let his gun fall to the ground. He had lost the drop in trying to save his brother.

"Down on the ground, Mitch!"

The two Parker riders and the outlaw guarding the mouth of the pocket had stared in amazement at the sudden burst of gunfire. Their guns were out. They started toward the spot. The shotgun roared at them. They scattered back toward the milling cattle in the pocket, away from that sleet of small lead.

Glowering Mitch dismounted. Larry slammed in a fresh shell, backed his horse away and left the saddle, too. He almost fell on his face when he hit the ground. Mitch was jumping toward him when Larry caught a drunken balance and got the shotgun muzzle up.

"Lie down, damn you!" he gasped thickly.

Mitch took one look at the weaving, wild-

eyed scarecrow who threatened him with the shotgun, and went down in the dirt, cursing.

THE bunch of cattle coming through the canyon were scattering in panic. The two men behind them opened fire. Lead keened past Larry's head as he opened up with the shotgun over the scattering steers. The blast of shot drove one of the men half out of the saddle. He was clawing at his face as he retreated at a gallop. His companion followed, leaning low to escape the next sleet of lead. They could face bullets, but their nerves broke at standing up close to a scattering charge of shot that couldn't miss.

Weaving, staggering, Larry reloaded the shotgun again and lurched over to the bank and dropped behind a small boulder. There he'd stay. He was too weak to get up again.

Mitch Parker started to rise, then flopped down again as Larry cut dirt near his head with a sixgun.

"I'd kill you if it wasn't for Kareen!" Larry called. "You're a dirty snake, but if she wants you, she can have you. Lie there! We're holdin' the canyon!"

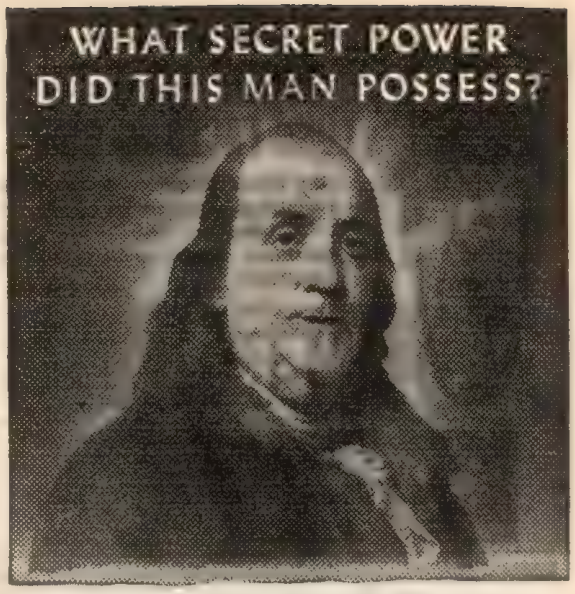
"You're crazy!" Mitch bawled. "You can't stand 'em off! Lemme up an' I'll see you get out of this safe!"

The three men who had fled back into the pocket out of shotgun range, opened up with their rifles now, throwing lead toward the spot where Larry lay.

The man he had chased back up the canyon had stopped. Beyond them four riders burst into view, galloping toward the trouble. Every man within hearing would be coming. Mitch was right. There wasn't a chance.

They knew he had only a shotgun. They stayed back out of range and threw lead at the spot where he lay half-exposed behind the small rock.

It made Larry laugh grimly to himself.



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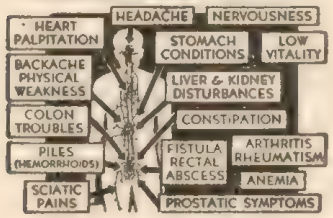

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He'd solved this thing, had it all settled. But where would that get him now? The posse that had been chasing him had apparently lost his trail. They would not come now. And he could not hold out much longer. It was all one huge joke to Larry Remington now. He would die, and all he could do was laugh. This whole thing was entirely too crazy. From the time he had busted away from the sheriff until the rustler gang turned on themselves, nothing had made much sense. But Larry was not through yet. He had forgotten, years ago, how to quit.

He jacked another shell into the shotgun, settled down with lead whizzing over him, to wait. Maybe he'd get another shot or two in before he died. . . .

Mitch Parker hugged the ground and swore loudly.

Dirt scattered over Larry as bullets struck beside him. He raised up to see better, and something clubbed him on the side of the head. He knew the shotgun had slipped out of his hand. He caught a blurred glimpse of Mitch jumping up. Everything went black then.

A booming voice was the next thing he heard.

"He's too tough to kill! Look at him wiggle! That blood in his hair's from a crease. The bone ain't broke."

Larry opened his eyes. He was lying on the ground. Jughead Taylor's black beard was above his face.

"Got your noose ready?" he said.

Several men were standing around them. Distant gunfire was audible. Mitch Parker was standing nearby with his hands tied and a rifle held at his back.

"Sure we got a noose," Jughead rasped. "For Mitch there. Fellow who calls himself Missouri Red talked some before he cashed in his chips. Son, the boys are ready to give you a celebration. An' you've done a heap for me today. They was cleanin' out my best beef."

HUNTED LAWMAN

"Damn you an' your beef," Larry groaned, sitting up. "Where's Pete Blythe?"

"Leadin' the boys after the outlaw bunch. Pete swears he'll clean out everything from here to Sunday School Wells this time. He's a sheriff to be proud of. An' don't think too hard of me, son. I made a mistake an' I'm apologizin' for it. Kareen stopped me back at the Parker ranch an' said if anything happened to you, she'd spend her life hatin' me. An' you're all cut up on the head where a rock or a piece of lead scraped you. How do you feel? You don't look so good."

"Terrible. There's Mitch Parker. Take him back to her."

"Don't know what she'd do with him." Jughead shrugged. "She told me back at the Parker ranch she was gonna marry you, no matter what happened."

"Karen said that? You wouldn't fool me, Jughead. She said it, sure?"

"Uh-huh."

Larry stared from blood-shot eyes. Then he grinned. "I reckon she is then. Gimme your hand, Jughead." ■ ■ ■

RIGHT CARGO

(Continued from page 8)

"Which boat carried th' tobacco an' likker?"

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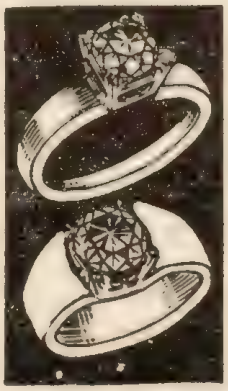

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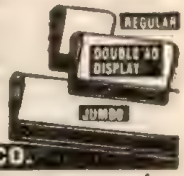

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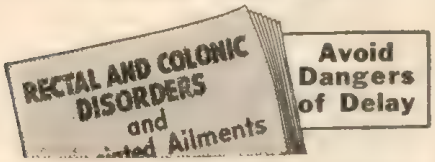

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(Continued from page 29)

ly, and his face was gray. Gid glanced at the shoulder and smiled wanly. "Didn't get down fast enough," he said. "They took my gun from me when they first came in, an' I had to just sit there like a damn fool. A change had come over Gid Lanton. Maybe it was due to the shock of his wound, which had jolted him and made him call on resources within himself that he hadn't known were there. In this moment something of old John Lanton's spirit showed in his eyes. "Hell, Mark," he said, "what's needed around here is a Lanton of your cut. We'll make it partners. What do you say?"

"We'll talk about that," Mark promised, turning aside to look at the others. Ben Wale had herded his prisoners out of the house. Mark saw that Cowley still lay on the floor, breathing heavily but still unconscious. Lil Vorhees was near him, a small round bullet hole in the low V of her dress-top. A bullet intended for Mark or Gid had, in the darkness, struck her instead. She was dead.

But he thought of that only distantly. Most of his thinking was concentrated on Nan Trellew, and he knew now that he loved her, that this was the only place he could put down roots and that he wanted her to share his life.

He found her in one of the rooms, her wrists and ankles tied to the corner posts of the bed. "Mark!" she cried. "Oh, Mark, are you all right? I could hear everything down there, and I wanted to die, thinking of what they were going to do to you. I— Mark, you idiot, untie me!"

But he was bending over her, smiling to reassure her, smiling with something of the gay and carefree spirit of his drifting days. He kissed her warm lips, gently but hungrily. And found there, in her unashamed and ardent response, all that a man could seek. ■ ■ ■

HUNGRY—BUT HEROIC

(Continued from page 45)

Wilson and Johnson occupied a table in the far end of the room, keeping to themselves and talking quietly. Everts and Dillon stood with Red Pickell and the merchant Wells, halfway down the bar. All of them were lending their voices to the general rumble of talk, which concerned Ben Gordon and a rope.

"You wouldn't hang the wrong man, would you?" Pecos' cold voice broke through the rumble of talk and brought instant silence. "Ben Gordon had nothin' to do with that robbery."

Wells spoke up heatedly, "You can't be sure of that until you find out who did it."

"I know who did it," Pecos said evenly. He stood free of the bar, his right hand hanging loosely at his side, his gray eyes narrowed. Curly took a quick step away from him and faced the room, his arm crooked.

"You know?" Wells echoed weakly.

Pecos nodded coldly. "There were two men, riding unbranded horses. They had their own horses cached outside town, figuring to pick them up quick and go back to the ranch. The sheriff made things pretty hot for them, but they still circled back and picked up their own horses. I found the place where those horses had been tied, and I know what brand they were wearin'." Pecose paused to let that sink in while his level gaze focused coldly on Clink Everts and Larry Dillon. "Five Drag!" he shot out suddenly. "How about it, Clink?"

Clink Everts turned a pasty white. For a moment he stood stock still, his eyes wide with shock. Then he stabbed for his gun while, at the same time, Larry Dillon threw himself sideways and yanked a gun out of his belt.

Pecos' bullet slammed into Clink's right shoulder, smashing him back against the bar and sending him heavily to the floor. Dillon triggered one shot, but Curly's bullet caught him between the eyes.

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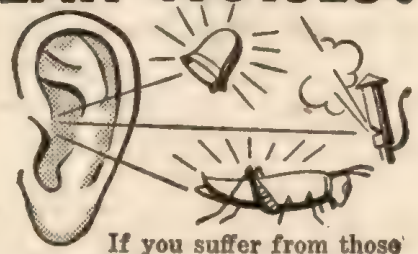

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Quickly Pecos bent over Clink, not wanting him to have time to recover from the shock. "The charge is murder, cowboy," he said swiftly. "You better help yourself all you can. Where'd you put the stuff?"

All defiance had fled from Clink Everts. "It's . . . under that old culvert . . . on the Sunset road. We had a good plan, but Gordon ruined us."

Pecos straightened slowly and wiped a sleeve across his face. "Better get the doctor," he suggested.

Someone hurried out after the doctor, while Scott Bradley, still looking dazed, strode outside to go after the loot. The rest crowded around Pecos, all talking at once.

"How did you know those horses were Five Drag?" Red Pickell asked curiously. "They make the same kind of tracks as any other horse."

"I didn't, but I knew Clink Everts rode my horse last night."

"How did you know?"

Pecos leaned back against the bar and grinned faintly. "That horse of mine is kinda particular about who rides him. I figured whoever took him would have trouble with him, and Brandy's not quick to forget a man who's worked him over. I watched him when you fellas come out to see him. Clink Everts was the man he spooked at."

"And you figured Clint would break if you jumped him, huh?" Red scratched his head thoughtfully, then looked up, a grin of tentative friendliness replacing the hostility that had been evident in his expression. "You can read sign pretty good, can you? My boss'll be back tomorrow. You boys lookin' for a job?"

"Just show me the corral," Curly said quickly. "I'm one of the gentlest cowpunchers you ever saw."

"Step up, Red," Pecos drawled with a grin. "Before the town quits payin' my expenses, I'll buy a drink." ■ ■ ■

(Continued from page 77)

true mariner, elected to perish with his ship, and stayed rooted at his useless helm till the wagon lurched to a drunken stop against a fence.

He walked confidently back to the group who had deserted, but nothing he could say would move them to invest any more of their cash into building a fleet of these craft. They were lucky to be alive, they said. They would tempt fortune no further.

Windwagon Thomas shrugged philosophically, boarded his own, lighter craft and set sail. In a few moments he was out of sight, and was never heard of again except in Indian legends, which mention with considerable amazement a wagon which moved with neither horses nor oxen to draw it, and a flag attached to it, bigger than a tepee. Of its passenger they say that he wore a confident, satisfied smile. None of the Indians know what became of him. Or perhaps they just won't tell. ■ ■ ■

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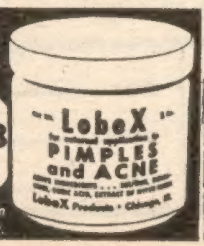

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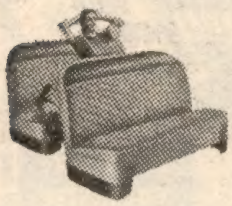

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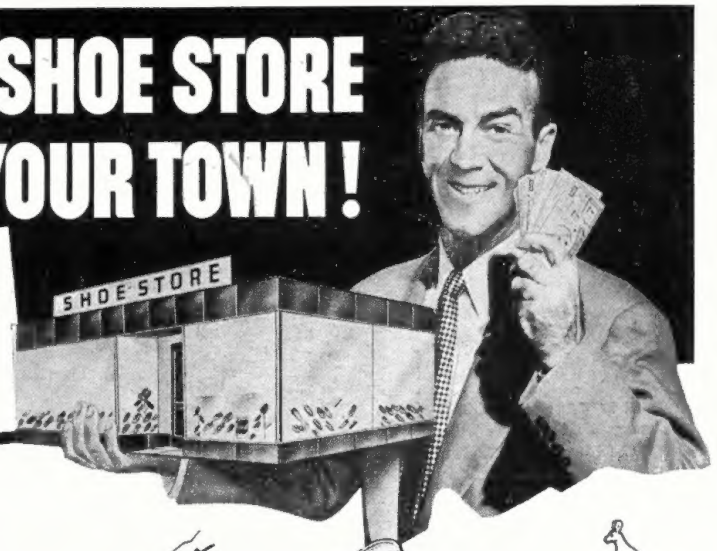

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